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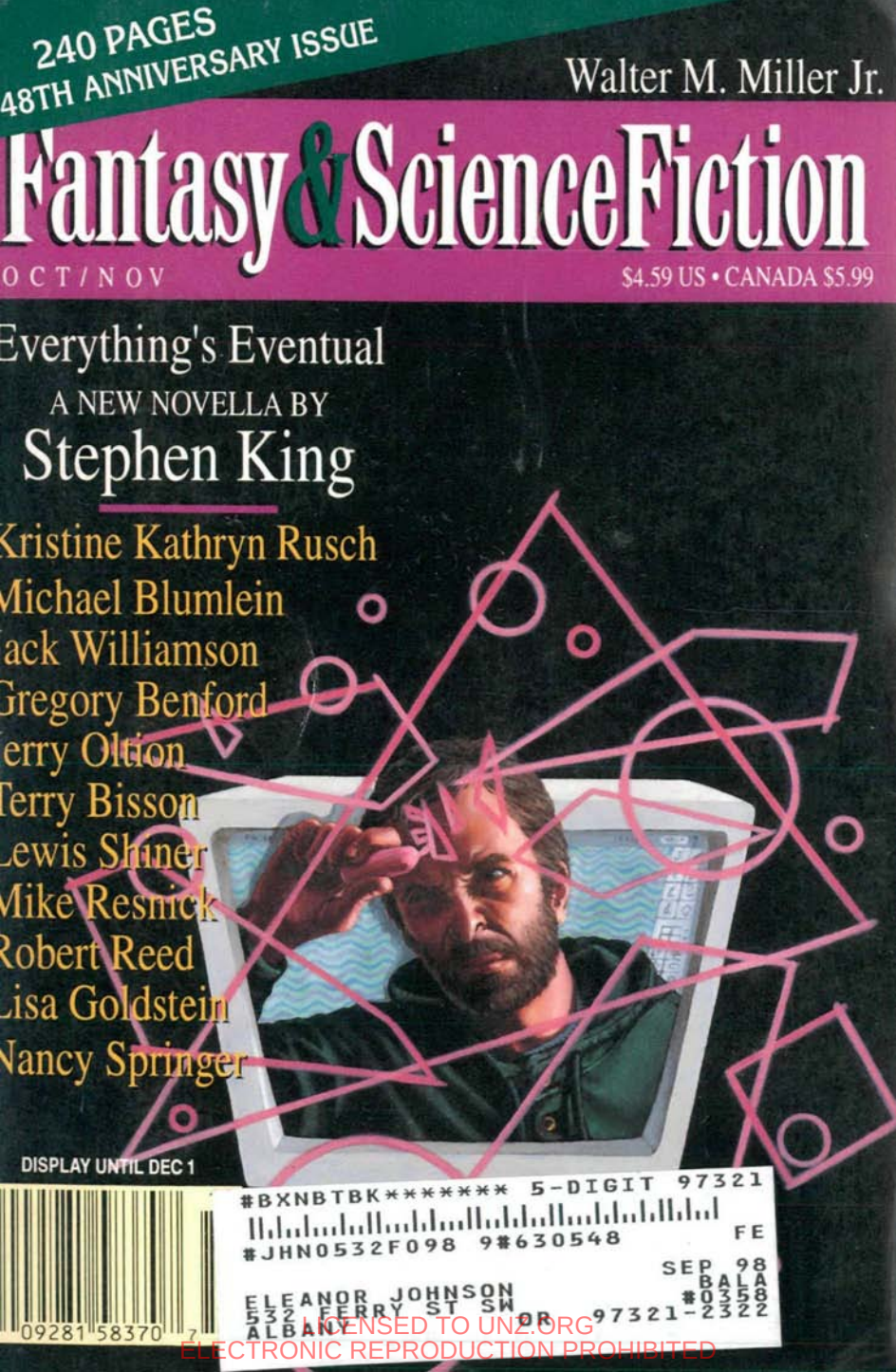

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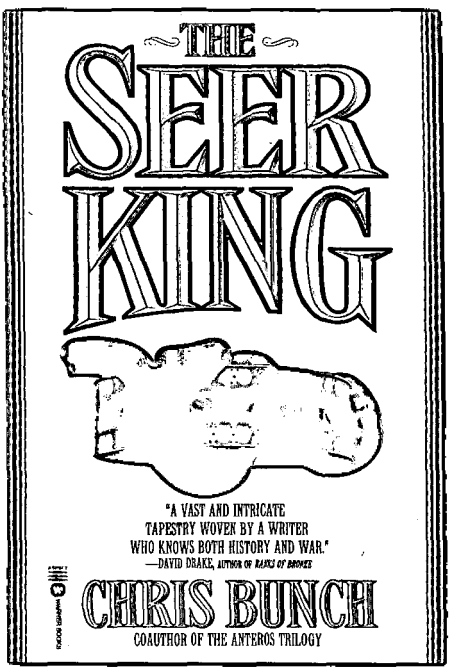
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THE MAGAZINE OF
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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

LATELY MY schedule has been unrealistically hectic. The kind of hectic in which I find myself saying, "I don't have time for that" to simple things like long meals with friends or a two-mile jaunt on the beach. A week ago Monday, my husband had had enough. He dragged me to our local theater (we live in a town so small that we only have one) to see *Extreme Measures*, the Hugh Grant/Gene Hackman thriller.

When we arrived, we discovered that the theater's new owner was inaugurating a policy. On Monday nights, he would show an old, unusual or artsy movie as a double-feature with the main bill. And he was starting with *The Wizard of Oz*.

Now I had seen *The Wizard of Oz* every year since I was three. The movie is such a part of my life that in 1994, while unpacking in a hotel suite, I found myself reciting each line in perfect unison with the television in the next room. I *did not* have time to stay, especially since I had just used two precious hours to see a fairly good thriller.

My husband, who had seen *Oz* on the big screen once before, told me I'd be missing an experience. I was willing to miss it. Then the theater showed the trailer, and it was spectacular. I decided I could watch the first ten minutes of the restored classic.

The audience that night was a strange mixture of thriller-viewers, aging hippies, and parents with young children up past their bedtimes. Most of the thriller-viewers were working professionals, all giggling about staying out past *their* bedtimes (the sidewalks in this town roll up at 9 P.M.). The aging hippies smelled as if they'd been using aging pot to spice up their evening and fortunately sat in the back. The parents sat up front. Among the parents was a father with a six-year-old daughter and a three-year-old

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son. The son's voice carried. He wanted to know if this was a special movie.

"Very special," his father replied.

The theater owner thanked us all for coming, the house lights dimmed, and the familiar clouds blew across the screen. I had first seen this film when I was three, a very bad year that saw the death of my only nephew and John F. Kennedy in the same month. When Dorothy sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," I knew exactly how she felt, and when she arrived in Oz, I wondered why she ever wanted to go home again.

Seeing the film as it was meant to be seen revived all those emotions, all those memories, and at the same time, made me realize that, in over twenty-five viewings of the film, I had missed a lot. When Dorothy goes to her bedroom after Miss Gulch takes Toto, Dorothy stares at a dog bed with Toto's name on it. When she first walks down the Yellow Brick Road with the Scarecrow, the Wicked Witch of the West is hiding behind a tree, a detail cut out of the television version because the screen is too small. And so on, and so on.

Behind me, a man in a three-piece suit softly recited each of the Cowardly Lion's lines. The entire theater whisper-sang "We're Off to See the Wizard," and one of the hippies screamed with drugged delight at the flying monkeys.

But it was the three-year-old boy who made the experience most delightful. He was a savvy viewer, much more savvy than I was at that age, and completely caught up in the story itself. In that moment of silence after the house plunks down in Oz, when the bed stops spinning, the visions are gone from the window, and Dorothy exclaims in surprise, the little boy asked his father, "Is this a dream? Or is it real?"

His father said, "Just wait."

"He was way ahead of me at that age," my husband whispered, just as the Cowardly Lion clone whispered the same thing to his companion behind us. The boy was way ahead of me too at that age, but he got me thinking.

It was here, in this film, that my love for fantasy took root. I know it had always been there. My mother has a picture of me at one sitting on a stack of children's books, thumbing through one and trying to read to myself. I was brought up with classics.

But I survived because of *The Wizard of Oz*, because there was an Oz over the rainbow, a place where the dreams you dared to dream did

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come true. And that message of hope, so important at the tail-end of the Depression, was equally important in the early sixties. Every year, it played again, with the magical images and the hope. And somewhere, in one of those repeated viewings, the seeds of fantasy began to grow in my heart.

At the end of the film, the audience who, with the exception of one three-year old boy, had seen the film dozens of times, burst into delighted applause. On the way out, the little boy said, quite seriously, to his father, "That *was* a special movie." And his dad quietly agreed.

A classic I thought I had seen before turned into an experience I'm glad I didn't miss. Because *The Wizard of Oz* was meant to be seen on the big screen, until one sees it that way, it is only half a magic movie. Larger than life-size, it becomes a glorious total experience. Yet I wouldn't have stayed if my husband hadn't subtly manipulated me from my hectic schedule, if he hadn't pointed out that this was an event that comes along only too rarely and should not be missed.

Such classics exist in fiction too, and sometimes, with all the new books being published and all the demands on our time, we repeat my mantra, "I don't have time for that." And sometimes, as in the case of my recent movie-going experience, some reading experiences are worth making time for.

Which is why we're starting a new column. Mike Resnick is going to do an irregular column on Forgotten Treasures. Most will be books no longer in print, books you'll have to haunt the used bookstore or science fiction convention dealers' room to find. Trust me, you'll be glad you did. Many will be books you thought you were familiar with, just as I thought I was familiar with *The Wizard of Oz*, but after Mike's column, you'll see them in a whole new light.

So read, enjoy, and, if *The Wizard of Oz* arrives at a movie theater in your town, take the three-year-olds, the spouse, the rest of the kids, and all your closest friends. You'll be glad you did.

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Dale Bailey published his first story in F&SF, *and since then, he has sold us over half a dozen more. His work has been nominated for a Nebula, and has also appeared in* The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, *edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling. He has just finished his first novel, but fortunately for us, he's still writing short fiction.*

He modeled the town in "Quinn's Way" on the stories his father told him about Princeton, West Virginia, as he remembered it from the thirties and forties, although Dale does note that his father is nothing like the father in the story. "I have been lately fascinated by the strong bonds of family...," he writes. "Those bonds are infinitely complex, of course, and the story is in some respect an attempt to capture and examine those complexities."

Quinn's Way

By Dale Bailey

JEMMY E. USED TO SAY that Sauls Run was so small that if you farted on the east side of town, they'd be talking about it on the west side before the stink even died. By the time I was twelve years old, I knew this to be a lie.

These days it has become fashionable for folks to claim they have been abused: physically, mentally, sexually, you name it, I've seen it all and litigated most of it. But in those days — the good old days, a few of the treasured relics I call friends like to term them — no one claimed anything of the sort, under any circumstances. Ever. Which is not to say that it didn't exist — though most of the aforementioned relics would say it didn't — or that most people weren't aware of it either. Such atrocities have always been more common than most folks like to think about, and good people everywhere have mastered the art of not seeing what's plain before their eyes, and maybe that's okay, too. In my bleaker moments, I've often thought that our illusions alone — our cherished, beloved illusions

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— enable us to wake up each morning without stuffing the barrel of a revolver in our collective mouths.

But such philosophical abstractions don't help much when you're twelve years old and in almost constant pain — physical or mental, or both — more often than you want to think about. By the time I was twelve, I knew that the town of Sauls Run stank, literally (of the coal slag forever smoldering in the hills above town) and figuratively (we'll get to that). I knew also that the stink was a miasma more oppressive than any mere intestinal gas. And I had begun dimly and with horror to perceive that it just might not be limited to Sauls Run; it might be present everywhere. But one thing I knew and knew for certain: Jemmy E. had it wrong when he said that Sauls Run was so small that everybody in town was sure to gossip about the latest stink. The truth was that nobody in town would say a word about the things that really stank in Sauls Run, West Virginia.

But we both knew that everyone could smell them.

In forty years as a lawyer, I have learned one true thing about stories, real stories as opposed to fictional ones. They have no true beginnings. There is an irony in this, I suppose, for if I have learned even one other true thing, it is that more than anything else, people want their stories to be shapely as the stories of fiction are shapely. Clear beginnings, problematic middles, sensible resolutions.

This accounts for the fascination most folks have with the law, for a court of law is designed to create beginnings where none are visible, to force problems to unnatural resolutions. The law tells us a lie we want to believe: that past history is inadmissible. It does not matter if the thief who stole your wallet only wanted to feed his hungry children. It does not matter if the drunk driver who killed your daughter had no control over the disease coded into his genes. Beginnings lead to moral distinctions; and moral distinctions...well, we'll come to them too, I guess.

Thousands of facts are relevant, of course, and past history always counts, but I'm enough of a lawyer to know that still we must begin. So. This story starts in the bright, hopeful summer of a long-ago year when a good war had ended in victory, when a famine of want had drawn to a prosperous conclusion, when the nation turned its face to a future unblemished by presentiment of disaster. It begins in an age of innocence,

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in a day when children — even twelve-year-old boys — could still believe in magic. It begins here, with the sound of a train whistle.

Listen:

DARKNESS SHROUDED the town of Sauls Run, West Virginia, and everyone was sleeping. Nothing stirred but the wind, which chased ragged scraps of newspaper through streets of dew-settled dust. The dew had been early and generous; it glinted from every surface, from every blade of grass and leaf; it hung like jewels in the silken webs of fat and drowsy spiders. Here and there, electric night-lights shone dimly in the windows of the shuttered houses, but many homes still depended on gas and kerosene for heat and light. The great war was over, and mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki had ushered in an age of anxiety, but Sauls Run lingered still, only three years short of the middle of the century, in the innocent moment between the agrarian past and the industrial future. If anyone had been awake to observe it (no one was), he could have noted the juxtaposition of these worlds: in the hills above town, the mines had long since been mechanized. Great machines gnawed coal out of the earth and sometimes gnawed the arms and legs of miners, too. Here, alone of all the places near the town, men were awake and the night jostled with the noise of trucks and chain-driven cars. Elsewhere, it might have been 1897 instead of 1947. Hitching posts still stood outside most public buildings; many homes still had an outhouse in the backyard; and at three-thirty in the morning, everyone in town still slept. Cats dozed in open windows, dreaming of mice; chained up in the vacant lot by the Grand Hotel, a monkey slumbered atop a locust post, dreaming of the moist verdant jungle he used to know; even the presses of the Daily Telegraph were still, dreaming their unfathomable dreams — that quiet, that hushed, that peaceful.

In a ground-floor bedroom of a rambling structure near the courthouse, lay a dark, fragile-looking boy named Henry Sleep — ironic, this name, for of all the people in the town, Henry Sleep alone hovered in that dreamful state between sleep and wakefulness. He alone thrashed in his bedclothes, his ears pricked to detect the slightest noise at the open window.

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Listen:

The howling siren song of a locomotive broke across the sleeping town, suddenly and clear. Henry's eyelids sprang up like window shades. In the moment before he came fully awake, he dreamily recalled the poster he had first seen three endless weeks ago, half-hidden among the sun-bleached war-bond placards and faded ads for patent medicines that thronged the Grand Hotel bulletin board: a tiger, a flaming hoop, these bright proclaiming words:

Bitterroot & Crabbe's World Famous
Circus and Menagerie!
Direct from a Command Performance
Before the Crowned Heads of Europe for
a SPECIAL LIMITED ENGAGEMENT!!
3 DAYS ONLY: JUNE 7-10!!!

The train roared again, shredding the poster into streams of vivid colors. *Wake up!* it screamed. *Wake up!* Henry sat up in bed, his heart thundering. Again, the whistle shouted, and this time it blew open all the closed doors in his heart. Who cared if the whole damn town was sleeping?

Henry kicked the bedclothes aside and reached for his trousers. He slid his shoes on and lifted the window sash. Night air flooded the room, freighted with the scent of lilac. Every cell in his body screamed itself awake as he slid his leg over the window sill and into the blackness.

Just then, just there, he experienced a single twinge of doubt. If his father found out —

Away over the folded hills and sleeping houses of Sauls Run, the whistle bellowed again. Hell with it, he thought. Ducking through the window, he dropped to the ground and headed off through the dark to find Jemmy E. The whistle blasted again as the circus train came roaring into town.

Through the deserted streets they ran: Henry Sleep and the black cowlick his mother couldn't tame, dark eyes and furtive, fearful smile; Jemmy E., wild-eyed and pale, his spiky hair ashimmer with a jack-o' lantern glow. Breathless through the dirty streets — past the monkey,

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scolding from his post; past the Stull house, broken window-shards like jagged hungry teeth; past the Bluehole, depthless in the moonlight, lair of serpents carnivorous and dread.

To Cinder Bottom they raced, row after row of burnished rails strewn with cast-off spikes and coal. Their leather shoes pounded the ties. Smells of dirt and diesel and oiled iron hovered in the air. The train whistle shattered the stillness and harried them across the tracks to a switch-plate above the yards. Here a single track on a mounded hillock curved away to the county fairgrounds.

"Let's go!" Henry shouted. "Hurry! It's coming!"

He glanced over his shoulder. Jemmy E. had dropped to the tracks behind him. Henry paused, his breath burning in his lungs.

"What are you *doing*?"

Jemmy E. lifted his hand for silence. Henry fidgeted impatiently. The Stone Bridge loomed over the yards, black against the graying sky. Here and there a light blazed in a lonely window. Along the ridge to the west, the milkman's headlights made fitful progress from house to house. Henry's stomach growled.

"Come on!" he hollered.

"Quiet, you dope," said Jemmy E. "Listen."

Henry dropped to his knees beside the tracks. Cinders ground into the knees of his trousers; too late he regretted his carelessness. A shadow like a summer cloud slid across his heart. Then he pressed his ear to the dew-chilled rail and all shadows were forgotten. The iron bucked with tidings of the onrushing locomotive. *Bitterroot and Crabbe!* the rail screamed. *Circus! Menagerie! Coming! Coming!*

He had almost forgotten the trousers when he felt a hand at his shoulder. He twisted around, his heart rattling in its cage of ribs. Jemmy E. stood limned against the pale sky. He grinned like Old Nick himself: a grin crooked and charming, and just a little dangerous.

"Let's go!" he said.

He went, a pale blur, a wraith against the lifting dark. Henry trailed his fingers along the rail — it sang with greetings — and watched the soles of Jemmy's shoes flashing in the murk. Jemmy E.'s voice floated back to him — gently mocking — and took substance in the air: "Can't catch me!"

Henry, shouting laughter, leaped forward, his feet scrabbling for

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purchase in the cinders. Off like a rocket, like a bullet from a gun, sucking in lungfuls of the sweet, sweet morning air, until the other boy appeared before him. The tracks curved still farther from the Cinder Bottom railyards, dove through a crepuscular stand of birch — white trunks like sentinels in the gloom — and emerged into the open fields that bordered the fair grounds.

Bitterroot and Crabbe! sang the locomotive in a voice that filled the world. *Menagerie! Circus! Bitterroot and Crabbe!*

Out of nowhere, it bore down upon them. Henry felt its hot breath upon his shoulder; its iron wheels screamed like banshees. He lowered his head. His legs pumped furiously. His feet found the ties as if by magic. He risked a glance behind him, and the train — train? — the monster — the fury — the dragon — encompassed his entire field of vision. Still Jemmy E. fled on, an arm's length before him, his legs rising and falling as if all the demons of hell had been loosed upon his heels. The locomotive screamed like some terrible beast from the prehistoric past.

"Jemmy!" Henry screamed. "Jemmy!"

But the clangor, the din, the sheer preposterous world-shattering pandemonium of the monster sweeping down upon them, drowned out his little cry.

His feet flashed over the ties. He willed them to move faster, faster. A deadly vision hovered before him: a badly placed foot, a moment of vertigo, and then the train, the train, hungry wheels gnawing at his flesh. Henry risked another backward glance. The locomotive roared and surged after him. He screamed in exhilaration and ran as he had never run before. A little wind touched him, tugged at him. He reached out for Jemmy in the last moment before the train devoured them; together, shrieking gales of joyous laughter, they leapt from the tracks. He seemed to fall forever, and then the soft, sweet-smelling grass reached up for him with a thousand eager hands. He skidded into the marshy soil at the base of the declivity and opened one eye as the train blurred by above him in a rage of sparks and thunder.

"Damn! Did you see that? Did you? *Did you*?" Jemmy E. popped out of the weeds beside him, pounding his chest and chortling with delight. He pounced on Henry, braying demented laughter, and they wrestled with the simple joy and exhilaration of survival. At last, exhausted, they parted.

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Henry plucked a long blade of grass, and sucked on it meditatively as he watched the train slow, disgorging billows of steam. An elephant trumpeted; roustabouts leapt from open cars in groups of two and three. Jemmy E. turned his face to the sky and let loose a wordless shout of delight. As if in answer, the elephant trumpeted again.

"God," said Jemmy E. "Don't you wish it could be like this forever?"

The sheer absurdity of the idea set them off again. By the time the laughter ceased, a fat crescent of orange had appeared over the eastern ridges. Henry studied his pants — so soiled with cinders and grass stains that he could only surmise their original color — and once again, that shadow passed over his heart. He glanced at Jemmy E. Now, visible in the spreading light, he saw the puffy bruise that discolored the other boy's cheek. He thought of Jemmy E.'s father, sullen drunk and down with the black lung. Not too long ago — no more than a year — Jemmy's dad had smashed him with a whiskey bottle. It took seven stitches to close that wound.

If only it didn't have to be this way, he thought. If only it could be like Jemmy E. had said: *Don't you wish it could be like this forever*? And he did, he did. Henry tilted his head against the slope, and chewed thoughtfully at the blade of grass. He closed his eyes. An inexpressible longing to extend this moment endlessly possessed him. He could not say why tears trembled at the corners of his eyes.

THE HEARSE SLID UP behind Henry three blocks from home — no longer technically a hearse, but forbidding nonetheless; long and low, forever stamped with the imprimatur of death. The county had picked it up cheap and pressed it into service as a police car, but the insignia on the door — *Sheriff* — could not wholly dispel the vehicle's macabre associations.

Once a vehicle for the dead, now the car itself was dying. The engine ran with a halting chop, and the tailpipes choked out clouds of malodorous blue smoke. But Henry trudged along the dusty street unawares, his head down, preoccupied with his thoughts. They continued thus — Henry first, the hearse lumbering after him like a cancerous mutt — for a block before the car abruptly sped up and passed him. A sooty cloud of smoke and dust

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engulfed Henry as the driver angled the hearse into a driveway, blocking his path.

"Henry!"

Henry licked his lips. He swallowed.

"Henry!"

"Yes, sir."

His father didn't answer. The hearse idled raggedly in the driveway, and Henry stood before it like a sinner called to judgment, his pants soiled and his suspenders dangling at his knees.

"Hello, Sheriff," someone called from down the street.

His father turned. Sunlight flashed off the badge pinned to his cap.

"Morning, Mrs. Vellner," his father hollered in that voice he had — Henry's mother called it his "people voice," mellifluous and charming. "Charlie doing okay?" He used the smile that went with the voice. Without looking at Henry, he said, "Get in the car, son."

Henry climbed in, swinging the door closed on its rusty hinges. It latched with a fatal thunk. His father backed the hearse into the street. The car sputtered, coughing smoke as they started slowly home.

"You weren't in your room this morning, son."

"No, sir."

"Circus train come in this morning. A fellow down the fairgounds told me it near killed a couple kids on the track out there. You know anything about that?"

Henry didn't answer.

"I drove down t'other side of town. Seems Jemmy E. wasn't in his room this morning either."

Henry stared out the window and did not speak. The air felt cool against his face. At the intersection near the courthouse, ten or twelve cattle milled. Three boys with switches hustled about, urging them on. His father cut left to avoid the back-up.

"You know what I think of that boy."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what then?"

Henry blinked twice. "He's no account. Him nor his family."

His father didn't answer. They made another cut and the house came into view, a sprawling clapboard structure built by three generations of

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Sleeps of uncertain architectural competence. It stood at the corner, bordered on the east by a brick house belonging to the Millers and on the west by fields that climbed to the rim of the valley and the ridge beyond. Last summer, Henry and his father had painted the house, or Henry had painted it while his father limped along behind him, offering advice.

The limp was what the Germans had done to him, that and something more: for the man who came back from the war could be grim and cruel in a way that the man who left never had been. Henry still remembered the first time he had seen the archipelago of scars rising from the dense hair on his father's calf — like the humped spine of a serpent breaking the surface of a black, black sea. Even now, when his father wasn't home, he occasionally sneaked upstairs to gaze at his father's medals, arrayed as casually as a pocketful of change atop the dresser. His father had served in the war and he was a hero, Henry's mother liked to say. But he had seen some awful things, and now he was a little broken inside and they had to love him anyway. Henry tried to imagine what it was like to be broken inside — he had an image of sharp little pieces of glass poking into everything — but his father had started to speak again:

"That ain't all is it, Henry?"

"No, sir."

"Well go on, then."

Henry swallowed. "He ain't no account and you don't want me running around with him. They ain't — they aren't — " That was his mother's voice, that correction. "They aren't our kind of folks."

His father braked in front of the house. He turned the car off. "Your mother ain't going to be happy when she sees those trousers."

"No, sir."

"Go on in the house and get them off. Maybe your Mom can wash them before the stains set."

"Yes, sir." Henry opened the door and started toward the house. His father said:

"I'll be along directly, Henry. We got some business together."

"Yes, sir."

"Go on, then. I'll be along."

Henry's mother waited in the kitchen. When she saw him, she said, "Oh, Henry," but he sped by without speaking, through the living room,

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past the kitchen and dining room, and down the hall to his bedroom. He stripped off the soiled pants and left them in the hall for his mother. He could hear her out there, saying, "Asa, please — "

"Leave me alone, Lil," his father said. "The boy has to learn."

"He doesn't have to learn. He's a child. He'll learn soon enou — "

A quick sharp sound like a handclap stilled her, and Henry didn't have to be there to see the expression on her face. He had seen it before, her lips in a narrow whitened line, her large eyes swimming as she turned away. Henry clenched his fists and stared out the window. The sun stood straight overhead and the world looked hard-edged and sharp, without shadow. The full heat of the day had begun to bear down and a stillness had settled over the town. Dust from the streets gathered on the window sill and on the stone walk to the disused privy; it coated even the grass and leaves, so that everything seemed less alive and green than it had that morning, as if all the magic had drained out of the world.

From the doorway, his father said, "Henry."

He still wore his uniform, blue slacks, gray shirt, gun-laden belt. He had taken off his cap. Henry could see tiny beads of sweat on his forehead. His scalp was chafed pink by his hat-band where his hair had started to thin. He carried a willow switch, green where he had cut it.

"Now, then," his father said, without raising his voice. He came into the room and closed the door. He moved with an awkward gait, lunging with his good leg and sweeping the other one along behind it, so you could hear it and know he was coming — a thump and a long sweep, like somebody dragging a body across a wooden floor.

Henry lowered his underwear. He braced himself against the mattress and dragged a pillow close so he could bite down on it if he had to. He had learned not to cry out.

"This hurts me more than it does you, son."

Henry clenched his jaws as the willow switch descended with a hiss, but you could not prepare yourself for the pain. Fire raced along his bottom. His father grunted with the effort of it. Again. Again. Again. Each blow so painful that it seemed you could not experience such hurt and live.

Henry squeezed his eyes shut so hard that tears streamed down his face. His father was a good man. *He was!* He was a hero. Henry tried to

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picture the medals arrayed across the dresser and tried to remember his mother's words: *It was the war that had made him this way. It was the war, it was —*

But then he couldn't think that anymore. He couldn't think anything. It was all he could do not to scream —

His father paused, breathing hard. "Okay, son."

Henry collapsed against the bed. A moment passed, and when he thought he could stand without falling, he eased the undershorts over the welts. The brassy clamor of the circus band drifted through the open window; they were tuning up in the square by the courthouse.

"Parade's fixing to get underway," his father said. He shook his head. "You're grounded, son. You got to learn."

His father dragged him from the sprawling circus tent, saying over and over in his gentle voice, "You got to learn. You got to learn." The voice had a bizarre, sinister quality that puzzled Henry until he realized that it wasn't his father speaking at all. It was a clown, a capering, grinning harlequin with hair that jutted out in three comical tufts; he wore gigantic, floppy pantaloons, and shoes six sizes too big. The clown seized his collar and dragged him through the muck. Henry thrashed in desperation, but the clown just clutched him tighter. At last it paused, moonlight like teeth in those unruly tufts of hair. It leaned into his face. If the voice —

— *his father's voice* —

— had been unsettling, this was worse. Shadows slid like oil over the thing's face, and in this oleaginous play of dark and light, Henry saw that the bulbous rubber nose had come askew, and the colorful greasepaint had started to run. Underneath, he thought he saw another face, lupine and cruel, but in the mercurial light, he couldn't be sure. The clown moved closer, his breath a contagion in the air. He lifted Henry higher, and only then, dangling helpless above the ground, did Henry see the willow switch. The clown whipped it around in vicious, whispering circles. Henry could feel the wind of its passage. "You got to learn," the clown chanted. "You got to learn, you — "

" — dope! Come on! *Wake up!*"

Henry opened his eyes. Twilight shimmered among the trees, insubstantial as gauze. Jemmy E. stood at the window, his hair wildly aspike.

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He had a fresh bruise on his cheek, and a light in his eyes like Henry had never seen before.

"Come *on,*" he said. "It'll be starting soon."

Henry rubbed at his eyes. Mocking rags of dream —

— *got to learn!* —

— drifted in the still air. "What?" he said. He sat up too fast, and sharp little barbs sizzled along his back and rear. Then he remembered. The circus had come to town at last. "I can't. My dad."

"The hell with your dad," said Jemmy E. "The hell with him and his whole damn town. Come on!"

"I can't."

But there it was, clear and beckoning through the evening air, the voice of the circus: the honeyed charm of cotton candy and magicians, the monstrous chortle of the freaks. There it was: the joyous shout of the calliope, the basso trumpet of the elephant, the brassy jig of the band, the snap of canvas in a summer breeze. The voice of all wild, untamed things, calling out to his boy's heart. He would not let this be taken from him. He could not.

Out then, out through the window to the welcoming dark, to streets lit fitfully by fireflies and moonlight. Out and away, his father's house eclipsed by night. To Cinder Bottom and the fairgrounds beyond, to the midway thronged with townsfolk in their grays and browns. You could see the coal in the lines of their tired faces and their knotty, bruise-knuckled hands, in their clothes and hair and in their eyes, hungry for wonder. The circus folk flitted like spirits among them — hucksters and acrobats, dwarves and clowns, their faces burnished and shiny beneath the electric lights strung hastily overhead. Alleys and alleys full of such people — jugglers, vendors, freaks and fortune-tellers — talking and yelling and selling all at once in glorious pandemonium. And such smells! Hot dogs and cotton candy and good old-fashioned sweat, and over all, the wild, earthy exhalation of the animals, caged and tawny in their alley beyond the tent.

A trumpet sounded, and a barker cried out in the dark. "This way," said Jemmy E. He grabbed Henry's hand, and led him through the twisting crowds that shuffled toward the tent, their faces slack and eager, like the faces of pilgrims or of children. They ducked through the slow-crawling

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line to the ticket booth; ran along a track of garishly painted boxcars, shuttered now and dim; and emerged into the lane where the animal cages had been parked. Smells hung heavy in the air here — smells of wet fur and old straw and rotting meat; and the unfettered stink of the animals themselves, tigers astalk in their cages, goats huddled in their pen, elephants all in line, hooked trunk to tail as they waited with sad, patient eyes for the show to get underway. Just ahead, in the pool of radiance beneath an electric bulb, three roustabouts struggled to control a balky horse. Jemmy E. clutched at Henry.

"Now," he whispered fiercely, and for the second time that night, Henry saw a light in his eyes that he'd never seen before. A crazed shine of joy or fear or maybe both.

They ducked into a narrow space between two cages. A heavy paw swiped the air over their heads, and Jemmy chuckled fearlessly. Beyond the cages, the crawlspace ended at a wall of taut canvas.

"Here," said Jemmy E., tugging at the base of the tent. He lifted it a foot while Henry crawled beneath it, and then he followed. The vast space within was garishly illuminated. Henry saw towering many-peopled stands, three vacant rings in the center of the earthen floor, and everywhere troupes of ebullient clowns. Then the lights went out, plunging them into impenetrable dark. There was a sound as of a thousand in-drawn breaths.

The circus had begun.

THE LIGHTS BLAZED up with a flourish of trumpets. In marched the circus folk, led by a tall, cadaverous ringmaster clad in tails, his gray hair in a fan across his collar. Acrobats tumbled, clowns capered, elephants marched in lockstep with exotic women astride their broad heads. Around the tent they went, big cats roaring in their cages, horses prancing, jugglers juggling.

A flame of joy sprang alight in the heart of Henry Sleep. He flipped a hank of hair from his eyes, and watched hungrily, needfully. Around and around the circus people marched while the crowd cheered them on...and then the show began. The ringmaster appeared and disappeared as if by magic, in the darkness of the first ring or in the brilliance of the third or

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in the towering reaches of the tent itself, on a platform high atop the center post. Act after act he introduced in a rich-timbred voice that filled the airy reaches of the big top: Knife Throwing! Frank Buck and the Lions of Darkest Africa! The Soaring Marconi Brothers and the Never-Before-Attempted Triple Somersault!

On and on it went, act after fabulous act, a seizure of delight that Henry hoped would never end. But at last the tent fell dark. With a flourish, the ringmaster appeared in a spotlight. He bowed deeply and wished them a good night.

Jemmy E. tugged at Henry's sleeve. Out they went, under the canvas into the space between the cages, down the reeking alley to the lane of shuttered boxcars. As they merged into the crowd, Henry's heart jumped into his throat. He had seen his father.

"Run!" screamed Jemmy E.

But it was too late. Jemmy's face had gone slack; the bruises stood out lividly against his pale flesh. "We have to run, Henry," he whispered. "We have to!" Emotion seized his features. "Come on," he said. Henry took half a step toward him.

"Henry," his father said.

"*Please*," said Jemmy E.

Henry swallowed. "Let's go," he said.

They fled. People milled across the grounds, gathering in clusters to chat or smoke. Long lines wound from the concession and souvenir stands. Jemmy E. dodged through them recklessly, Henry close behind him.

He didn't see what arrested his flight, but it felt like running full-tilt into a down mattress. Something big and soft and smelling of lavender soap gathered him up. "Why Henry Sleep!" it said, and his heart fell.

"Evening, Miss Wickasham," he said. He tried to move past her, but her wrinkled fingers clamped like talons over his shoulders.

"I haven't seen you in ages — look how you've grown!" Miss Wickasham said. "How is your dear father? Such a shame about his leg, and him such a brave man. I haven't seen him in ages, but I voted for him in the — " She blushed. "Why Sheriff Sleep, I was just asking about you!"

Henry subsided.

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"Miss Wickasham." His father doffed his cap. "The boy and I were just having a bit of quarrel, I'm afraid."

"Henry?"

"That's right, ma'am."

She drew Henry close and pinched his cheeks. "Have you been bad? You know what happens to boys who misbehave."

He knew all right. He'd seen the fresh and livid bruise on Jemmy's cheek. Every time he moved, he felt thin stripes of agony erupt across his back and buttocks. Oh, yes, he knew — but he didn't know what he intended to say until the words were out, fatal and irrevocable: "I don't give a damn." He tore himself away, but his father clutched him and spun him around. Henry looked up just in time to catch the slap full across the face.

"You apologize to Miss Wicka — " his father began, but he didn't finish for a flat stone whizzed past Henry's shoulder and caught his father square in the forehead. He staggered. Henry wrenched loose, sending Miss Wickasham sprawling. She rolled on her back like an upended turtle, lunging after him as he passed.

"Murder!" she shrieked.

Heads turned as Henry sprinted by.

"Murder! Murder!" shrieked Miss Wickasham. She jabbed a claw after Henry. "Get that child!"

"What did she say?" someone asked.

"Murder," said someone else.

The crowd picked it up. "Murder, murder, murder." A torrent of accusations flooded the throng. Someone grabbed for Henry, but he slipped away. He followed the arc of the tent at a dead run and collided head-on with Jemmy E. They went down in a tangle of limbs, struggled up, and dashed off into the maze of cages and boxcars beyond the midway. Henry risked a glance back at the mob as they flew down the line of cages behind the tent.

"You didn't have to throw the rock," he gasped.

"You didn't have to push the fat lady down."

They ducked between the cages opposite the tent, into a lane of garish boxcars.

"Here!" someone shouted. "There they go!"

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"He's going to beat us within an inch of our lives," Henry said. "He's going to kill us."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Why'd you throw that rock?"

They turned a corner into another line of cars. Back here, far behind the main concourse, few lights had been strung. Minatory shadows loomed up, and for a moment Henry wasn't certain what was worse: getting lost in the maze of circus vehicles or facing the pursuing crowd.

"I'm just sick of it," said Jemmy E. He started to say something else and then stopped abruptly, panting. They had reached a dead end. Boxcars crowded in on three sides. A single light gleamed at the far end of the lane, but here the night pressed down thick and unyielding. Henry thought he heard things moving — slithering maybe — in the tenebrous depths under the cars.

"We've got to do something," Jemmy said. "If they catch us they'll hang me."

"Hang you? Are you crazy?" Henry stared, but he could see only a shadowed wedge of Jemmy's face.

Jemmy turned away. "I threw the rock because I wanted a chance to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?"

"I'm leaving. I'm running away."

"What happened?"

Jemmy was silent for a long moment. Henry could hear the pursuing mob, drawing closer. He could hear something moving under the boxcars. He was so afraid that he hardly dared to draw breath. Jemmy E. said:

"I think I killed my old man."

"Killed him? What are you talking about?"

"When I got home, he'd been drinking all morning. He said your dad had been hassling him." Jemmy laughed bitterly. "He beat the hell out of me. You think my face looks bad, you should see my ribs." He paused, and Henry thought of the red welts on his back and bottom. While they had been running, he had felt them cracking, breaking open.

Jemmy said: "After a while, he passed out and I...I was so mad, Henry. I've never been that mad. The whiskey bottle was still half-full, but I didn't care. That's how mad I was. I just smashed it over his head

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without even thinking. There was so much blood."

Henry didn't speak. The crowd had drawn nearer. He could hear them shouting, "Murder! Murder!" If only they knew, he thought, and fine hairs prickled at the back of his neck.

"I hid out all day. I didn't know what to do. I just wanted to say goodbye. I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"It's okay."

"You don't think less of me, do you? Do you?"

"No."

The crowd sounded very close indeed.

"You've got to get away," Henry said. A sickening image had come into his mind: Jemmy E., his face blue and puffy, his black tongue extruding from his mouth. Jemmy E. swinging at the end of a hangman's rope. He didn't know if they hanged kids, but he didn't want to chance it.

"What are we going to do?" said Jemmy E., and it was the first time in all the years they had known each other that *he* had asked that question instead of Henry Sleep.

Henry thought he heard a moist slithering sound in the dark spaces beneath the cars. But it didn't matter. He *knew* he heard the crowd, shouting angrily. Any minute they would appear at the end of the lane.

"The boxcars," Henry said. "We'll go under them."

Just then a door opened in a nearby car, and a wedge of light fell out, shattering the gloom. Henry swallowed as a long, bony arm clad all in black extended from within. A single gaunt finger with a yellow nail curled itself into an inviting crook. A calm, mellifluous voice said, "Why don't you boys step inside?"

LIKE DRINKING with Livingstone from the fabled well-springs of the Nile, or opening a long-dead pharaoh's tomb, mouth agape at the wonders there but fitfully revealed. That was what stepping into that car was like.

A suit of armor glimmered dully in one dim corner. In another, the calcified tusks of some prehistoric monster had been propped as carelessly as tent-posts. Amid the clutter piled atop the table along the far wall stood an abacus, a crystal ball, a shrunken head. Jemmy E. gasped. Henry executed an awe-stricken revolution, choking back a cry as a rattlesnake

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struck down at him from a shelf. He stumbled back and saw that the snake had been expertly stuffed — stilled forever in mid-strike, its eyes glassy and blind.

The door slammed shut behind them.

"Now then," said the ringmaster. He sat at the far end of the car in a chair as ornately carven as a throne. At the circus he had seemed vibrant, youthful. Close up, he looked like a man past death and into the first stages of decay. His long fingers steepled before his gaunt and bony face; his iron-gray hair swept back from a pronounced widow's peak and fell loose about his shoulders. He regarded them with obsidian eyes. After a moment, he reached out to the table beside his chair and adjusted a kerosene lantern. Skeletal shadows capered around the room.

Henry swallowed audibly. Paper rustled near his foot; a dun-colored rat the size of a loaf of bread emerged from a stack of disintegrating magazines and began to nose around the cluttered perimeter of the room. Henry saw that the abacus hadn't moved in days or weeks. A layer of dust clung like dandruff to the shrunken head. The ringmaster's tuxedo was frayed about the sleeves and shoulders; it had the threadbare sheen of clothes too often worn.

"Let's see," said the ringmaster. "You — " He leveled a gnarled finger at Jemmy E. " — must be Jemmy — Jemmy E., the locals call you, your name defies them. And you — " He nodded at Henry. " — must be Henry Sleep."

"How did you — " said Jemmy E.

"I spoke with your father this morning," the ringmaster said to Henry. "Charming man." He picked up a snifter of greenish fluid. Steam curled from it in wisps as he passed it under his hooked nose and sniffed delicately.

No one said a word. After a while, the tramp of heavy feet and voices raised in anger broke the silence. The sounds continued for a few moments — "I swear they went this way," "Murderous little wretches" — and then faded back the way they had come.

"I fear you are in dreadful trouble."

"What's going on here?" said Jemmy E. "Who are you?"

"I am Quinn. This is my circus. This is my car."

"What about Bitterroot?" said Jemmy E. "What about Crabbe?"

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"Bitterroot and Crabbe are pompous little ledger-keepers and number-toters. Mere conveniences. This is Quinn's circus, Quinn's place, Quinn's way. Quinn is master here."

"Lots of neat stuff you've got," said Henry.

"Trinkets," said the ringmaster. "Rubbish, trinkets, and junk." He leaned forward. "I want to talk about you."

Henry looked up. Jemmy E. stepped forward, his face half in shadow, that crazed gleam of fear or anger in his eyes.

"We have to get back," Henry said.

"Get back where, my young friend? Your father will hide you when you return. *His* father — " He nodded at Jemmy E. " — lies dead in a shack with blood drying on his face. Stay awhile. The circus has only just begun."

Quinn stood. He towered over them in the flickering light, clad all in black with his crimson bow-tie like a daub of blood at the base of his neck. He drained the snifter of vile fluid, and it seemed to Henry that the deep furrows in his face softened just a touch, that his gray hair had grown almost imperceptibly darker.

Then, with something like shock, he felt the impact of the ringmaster's words: *Dead, dead in a shack*. Then it was true. He saw the bone-weary shack where Jemmy E. lived with his father, desolate above a stream that ran black with coal dust. It seemed then that he stepped forward, stepped somehow through a doorway into the shack itself, and there he saw it for himself: Jemmy E.'s father, cheek to splintered table, his arms dangling, a froth of blood and snot caked on his chin.

He screamed and stumbled back. Wrenching his gaze from the crystal ball —

— *how did I come to look in there*? —

— he saw that he was in the ringmaster's cluttered car. "Dad?" Jemmy E. said, and Henry saw that he too had been in the broken shack, that still he lingered there, that maybe he would never leave. A spark of hatred tumbled into the dry kindling of his heart — hatred that Jemmy E. had been driven to this, hatred that such men existed. The stripes on his back burned. His mind churned with incoherent thoughts — *he's a good man, he's a good* —

"Dad?" Jemmy E. sobbed. "I'm sorry, Dad." He sank to his knees, his yearning hands uplifted. "I'm sorry."

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"Stop it," Henry said. "Stop it! You're killing him!" He snatched the crystal from the table. It threw off crazed, maniacal reflections as he hurled it away. The rat squealed and burrowed into the debris. Jemmy E. fell forward on his face, his thin shoulders heaving.

"I can take this pain from you," Quinn said into the silence. "I can make it go away."

Jemmy E. looked up.

They watched as Quinn knelt and threw back the lid of an oaken casket that alone of all the mysterious rubbish in the room lay free of dust. Hinges glided noiselessly in their sleeves as the lid fell open, revealing half a hundred glittering vials cradled in velvet collars. Quinn turned to look at them. The light flickered in the hollows around his eyes. It danced along the polished edge of the casket and fired the many-faceted vials with dancing luminescent beauty.

"Come to me," Quinn said, and they came. In fear and voiceless longing, they came. In eight willing steps apiece, they crossed that room.

Quinn retrieved a vial and held it aloft, its contents splashing motes of ruby light around the car. He loosened its little cork, and tipped a droplet into each of two tiny snifters, which he then held out to them. "Here is the essence of the thing," he said, though what thing he meant Henry could not say. He did not pause to wonder. He brought the snifter to his nostrils, inhaled the smell rising from within, like garlic and blood, and tilted it to his dry lips.

It lifted him out of himself, it swirled him away. He found himself at a window he had not seen before, gazing at a stricken desert landscape. The sun had fallen behind the distant mountains and evening scrabbled at the rocks with shadowy fingers. He was filled with terrible knowing: This day had been exactly as empty as the last and tomorrow would be the same. This is what it is to be old, Henry thought.

"Abalone, Arizona," Quinn said. "She sought me out when she saw that the world had died for her, that never again in her little span of days would she know passion."

Quinn said, "Here, now." Henry turned as the ringmaster tipped into his snifter a droplet of bitter yellow bile. "Selma, Alabama," Quinn was saying. "He sought me out — "

But Henry was not listening. He lifted the snifter to his lips and tasted

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almonds and bitter coffee. He stood in a rain-swept street beneath a flickering neon sign. There was an ashen flavor in his mouth that Henry could not know, but which he somehow recognized as the aftertaste of cigarettes and bourbon. I will never see her again, he thought —

Quinn was saying, "An old man from Hannibal, Missouri, left me this," and he let fall into the outstretched snifter a single droplet of clear blue river water.

Henry tipped it to his lips. Tears sprang to his eyes, for this pain he knew, though he had not known he knew it. He knew it in his heart or in his bones. Time held him green and dying; nothing gold could stay.

The snifter slipped from his nerveless fingers. Again Henry seemed to hear the long, low whistle of the locomotive break across the town where he alone lay sleepless; and now its voice was mournful, full of grief for all things past and passing. No more the joy of circus trains. No more the joy of sunlit, drowsy afternoons. Just the endless toil of life in these hard mountains. He thought of his mother, the gentle way she had, and how she would not meet your eyes; he thought of his father, who had gone to war a whole man and come back with the shards of his broken self sawing at his heart. All of them — his parents; Jemmy E.'s sad father, alone in his shack with his black lungs and his whiskey; the weary folk who had thronged the midway, their faces gray with coal that would not wash away and their eyes hollow with a hunger for some transitory wonder — all of them somehow lost and broken. Young, he thought desperately, to be young and hopeful in spite of everything. *Don't you wish it could be like this forever*? Jemmy E. had said. And he did. He did.

Jemmy E. said, "Who are you? What are you?" His voice was dim with fear or wonder. Henry turned to look at him, and saw him, really *saw* him for the first time ever — helpless and afraid. It was as if a fog had been lifted from his eyes, or as if he had for all these years been gazing through a film of waxen paper, perceiving the larger shapes of the world, but blind to the details that made the vision whole and true. *I do not want truth*, he thought, and a hollow pain went through his belly, a kind of longing for a state forever lost to him.

Jemmy E. stood looking up at Quinn, the little snifter empty in his veined and ragged hands. His clothes hung too large about his frame — old cast-offs Henry saw — and his hair stood blond and spiky about his head.

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He thought of Jemmy's father, slack and lifeless against the beat-up table where he had done his drinking. His heart was like a coal, white-hot with hatred.

Quinn sighed as he closed the oaken chest; he shuffled to his throne-like chair, neither as tall nor as looming as Henry had thought. "I am just an old, old man," he said, and the way he said it you knew that it was true. "But I can take this pain from you. I can leave you as you are or were. Young, free, hopeful." He waved a hand. "A boy's will is the wind's will," he said, and he seemed almost to envy them.

"How?" said Henry.

Quinn stroked the sinewy flesh between his finger and thumb. When he spoke, he seemed almost to be talking to himself. "Old," he said, "older than old, not seventy years or a hundred and seventy, but older still. Decades now I've feasted on the pain of others, but found no one to relieve me of my own." He chuckled under his breath and shook his head.

What fear had shackled Henry's heart now fell away, for it was true, he saw: Quinn had no power over them unless they surrendered it themselves. And if they did? He thought of the anticipation that had seized him when the circus train bellowed out across the sleeping town. A child alone could feel such joy. If Quinn could give them that — childhood everlasting, forever free of pain — was that so bad? Why not?

"And then?" said Jemmy E.

"You join the circus. Or you go off on your own, a boy that will not grow. 'Then' is up to you."

Jemmy E. stepped forward. When he spoke there was a hopeful and defiant note that Henry had never heard in his voice before. As if he feared this chance would somehow get away. "Please." His voice broke, and so Henry knew what was in his mind and heart: the dilapidated shack where lay his father's corpse. He could never leave that room, Henry knew, not unless Quinn could make him whole again.

"And you, Henry Sleep?" said Quinn, surprising him.

Across the stillness in the room, Henry's eyes sought Jemmy's face. *Don't you wish it could be like this forever*? Jemmy E. had said. And it could be. It could be.

The welts along his back flared red with agony. It did not have to be that way anymore, he thought. Hope surged up within him as he thought

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of himself and Jemmy E., how he had always envied the other boy — his quick, sardonic wit, and the daring that was nothing more than the freedom of nothing left to lose. I can be like him, Henry thought, I can be like him. And another thought occurred to him, an image from his dream: the clown who was not a clown, but his father, and the father who was not his father, but a creature wolfish and cruel. That was true, he knew — except...except that his father never raised his voice. Except that he could be kind. Except that he was a hero — and if he was broken inside, that wasn't really his fault, was it? Henry knew this to be true, as well. His mother had told him it was so.

And now he saw his mother as he knew she would be: her face lined with worry for him, and with grief. He thought of the way she slicked his cowlick down on Sunday mornings, of the way she looked away when she spoke, and would not meet your eyes. He thought: *I cannot leave her to him.*

"I am not evil, Henry Sleep," Quinn said kindly. "I can make you whole again."

But he had never been broken, or if he had been he would mend himself. He would be strong at the broken places.

"I have to get home," he said. Again, he met Jemmy E.'s eyes, and because they were boys and didn't know how to say good-bye, they did not hug or shake hands. But Henry could feel the loss of it; he knew that Jemmy E. could feel it too.

"See you around," he said.

"You know it, you dope," said Jemmy E.

Without another word, he slipped out of the car and off into the night. The town slept — the cats in their windows, the monkey chained atop his post, the presses in their gloomy subterranean chamber. It had grown chill and as he hurried through the desolate streets a million million stars gazed down from watchful skies, and could not be troubled to care that never in all the years of his life would Henry Sleep see his one true friend again.

By the time Henry reached home, the moon had fallen and the long front porch lay in shadow under its shingled canopy. From the fragrant darkness by the lilacs, he heard the steady rhythm of the rocker against

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the porch's slatted floor and he knew that his father had waited up for him. For a moment, he thought of turning, fleeing back through the sleeping streets to Quinn and Jemmy E. and the solace that they offered.

And then he resolved himself. He walked across the yard and mounted the stairs to the porch, deliberately treading on the creaking step. A lamp glowed thinly inside the house, and dim light fell through the window by which his father rocked, his face ascending into light and retreating into darkness with chill regularity. They waited like that for a time. Light gleamed against his father's badge and along the edge of the gun-belt, which he had removed and placed beside his chair. He rocked and rocked, and Henry warmed himself at the white-hot coal that was his heart and watched the light steal across his father's features and retreat before the encroaching mask of darkness.

"I don't want you to run away from me like that, Henry."

"Yes, sir."

Silence then, and more waiting. A shadow passed in the living room, occluding the light, and Henry knew that his mother too was awake. He could picture her clearly, sitting on the sofa, her hands twisting in her lap until nerves got the better of her and she had to stand and pace.

"I need to know where he is."

Henry didn't speak.

His father rocked awhile and Sauls Run slept around them and did not acknowledge them.

His father said: "You got to grow up, son. You got to grow up and see what it's all about."

"I know," Henry said.

"I only want what's best for you."

"I know you do, Dad."

An owl called softly in the darkness, and then there was only the sound of the rocker; his father's face loomed out of the shadows and retreated.

"I want to tell you a story," his father said. "This happened to me in the war. I was in a German POW camp. It was pretty bad there. The Germans were too busy trying to keep the war going on two fronts to care much what happened to us. We were so hungry that we ate the leather from our shoes. When they would let us into the yard for exercise — maybe

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once a day for fifteen minutes — we would spend the whole time looking for something to eat. Grass...worms...bugs. Just anything, you understand?"

Henry nodded, and then he thought: *He can't see me*, so he said aloud, "Yes, sir."

"A lot of men were very sick. From hunger, exposure, whatever. They would die pretty frequently, and the Germans would drag them out of the barracks where they kept us and bury them somewhere. I saw lots of dead men, and a lot of them were men I called friends."

His father fell silent then, for a very long time, and Henry waited. He could sense that his mother was listening through the screen, and he didn't think she had heard this story either, though he didn't know. His father didn't talk much, and one of the things he didn't talk about most was the war and what happened to him in it.

When he began to speak again, his voice was pitched low and without emotion. "One night, a man I knew woke me up — an American, another prisoner of war. He woke me up, and I could see that his face was covered with blood. That blood was smeared around his face and around his mouth especially. And he said, 'Rabkin's dead.' He said, 'Come on, you have to eat if you're going to survive. Rabkin wouldn't mind,' he told me. So I got up, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. I went back to bed and early in the morning, it was just starting to get light, German soldiers woke us up and marched us into the yard. They had built a gallows and five men I knew were hanging dead there, and one of them was the man who had woken me up. They had painted on the gallows in English, 'Here are five brave American cannibals,' and they let those bodies hang there until they had rotted almost to skeletons. As a reminder, they said."

"I'm sorry," Henry said, and then he didn't say anything because when the light slid across his father's face he saw the tears that glinted there. What could he say? What could anyone?

"Don't be. You have to understand. The Germans were awful, they were often evil. But they were right in what they did that night, because those men, they had broken a taboo that should not ever be broken. And they had to be punished because unless you punish the people who do wrong, society falls apart. You can understand why those men did what they did, but people have to be punished or we'll have chaos."

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"Okay," Henry said. But he wasn't sure it was okay. He didn't think he understood at all.

His father said, "That's why you have to tell me where he is, Henry. Even if you understand why he did it. You have to tell me where he is."

Henry said nothing. He felt as if the world had slipped from beneath his feet, as if gravity had been reversed, unshackling him from the earth and all things Earthly he had known. Everything had changed so swiftly, so completely. He reached out and took the rail that ran along the edge of the porch, as if by gripping it he could reestablish contact with the world he had lost: a world where creatures like Quinn could not exist, where fathers were fathers and not clowns or wolves or shattered and unhappy men.

"You have to tell me where he is."

Far, far away from here, Henry thought. He thought: I don't know where he's gone or how he's getting there. And a fierce longing seized him. *I should not have chosen this path. I should have chosen Quinn's way, I should have stayed with Jemmy E.*

"Henry." His father stood, dark against the light from the living room. He moved toward Henry.

Henry backed away. "He's gone. You won't find him."

From the screen door, his mother said, "Let the boy be, Asa. He hasn't done anything."

"This is between me and Henry. You stay out of it."

"I won't."

She opened the screen and stepped onto the porch. The wooden screen whined closed on its spring, striking the door frame with a bang. Henry stood there, caught between them.

"Don't you understand?" his father said. His voice had begun to rise. "A man has been murdered. Murdered, Lil. Beat to death with a whiskey bottle. Henry has to tell me."

His mother took a second hesitant step onto the porch. When she spoke, her voice quavered. She would not look up, and Henry saw then how it was for her and knew something of her courage.

"Asa, I'm sorry that happened to you. I'm sorry you had to experience that. But you're home now, and Henry and I — we love you, and we want you to be better. Just let him be."

"Goddammit, Lil, don't you see! A man died!"

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Henry saw lights come on at the Millers'. A face appeared at a window, but his parents didn't seem to care.

" — not a good man," his mother was saying. "He had it coming. He beat that boy constantly and the whole town knew it, Asa!"

"That don't matter, Lil! It ain't our place to judge. You can't just go around killing people you don't approve of! Now Henry is going to tell me where that boy is!"

"I can't," Henry said. "I'm sorry, but I can't." He moved away, but he wasn't quick enough. He never saw the blow, but all at once the left side of his face went entirely numb, and a thousand bells began to peal in his head. He staggered against the rail. Half the world had gone dim and blurry. The light shifted and distorted in his left eye.

Through the incessant clangor of the bells, Henry heard his mother scream. He tried to reach out for her to tell her it was okay — his daddy was broken inside and he couldn't help being this way — but he couldn't seem to get his legs to move. He realized he had slumped over somehow. His legs stuck out in front of him like broken sticks.

He was crying, and his mother was crying. He watched the two of them struggle in the half-light there before him, his father trying to get at him, saying, "He's got to tell me," and his mother sobbing and screaming through her sobs, "You're no better than he is, you son of a bitch, you're no better than he is!"

His head hurt so he closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he saw that his mother had curled herself into a knot on the porch. She held her hands cupped over her face. Her legs kicked helplessly beneath her. A dark animal shape crouched over her, massive fist upraised. Henry heard the dull thud of flesh on flesh as it descended. He blinked. He felt like he was underwater. In the wavering light he seemed to confuse this moment with his dream — the clown drew back its fist for yet another blow, and Henry saw that the rubber nose had come askew. The grease-paint had started to run. He caught a glimpse of something thin and lupine, unremitting in its hatred and despair.

"No, please — " he said through thick lips. He tried to push himself to his feet and sagged back against the rail.

His mother had stopped kicking. He could hear nothing but the sound of the wolf-thing, panting over her. He began to crawl toward the rocker.

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He heard the thumps of two more heavy blows before he made it there, and the detonation of a third as he fumbled at the gun-belt. At last, he dragged the revolver free. He pulled himself erect, using the rocker as a crutch. He almost dropped the pistol. It was unbelievably heavy, the heaviest thing he had ever touched. He staggered toward them — his unmoving mother and the wolfish thing that hunkered over her — and dragged back the hammer. Using both hands, he leveled the gun and pressed the icy barrel to the wolf-thing's temple.

"Stop," he said, as the thing drew back its fist for yet another blow. "Stop or I'll kill you."

The fist dropped to the porch. It became a hand. His mother drew a weak breath and began to cry. The wolf-thing looked up to meet his eyes, and in the light from the living room its face was pale and drawn, blanched by grief and fear. It was a human face and the tears it shed were human tears. It was his father's face. In that moment, Henry Sleep did not know whom he pitied most: the broken man or the huddled woman or the little boy with the gun who stood over them and wept. In the long run, he supposed, it didn't matter.

He said: "If you ever lay another hand on her, I'll kill you."

He said: "If you ever touch me again, I'll kill you."

He said: "The Germans were wrong to hang those men. They were wrong because they drove those men to do what they did."

Very softly, then, he lowered the hammer on the revolver and heaved it with every ounce of his strength into the dark yard. He glanced at the Miller house and saw that the lights were on and that there were faces in the window. He looked back along the broad, dirty street and in every house as far as he could see, lights gleamed and faces peered out the windows. No one had come to help them. No one had cared.

Henry turned and went through the door into the house. He turned off the light in the living room and walked through the familiar dark, past the kitchen and dining room and down the long hall to his bedroom. He slept soundly that night, and without dreams. He slept that way for many nights, and if he dreamed he could not remember what dreams they were. But sometimes, waking in darkness, he would hear across the valley and the sleeping houses of the town the lonesome, mournful exhalation of a locomotive, and on those nights he thought of Quinn and Jemmy E. He

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could not say whether the path he had chosen was right or wrong. But these things he knew: He had been broken. And he was strong at the broken places.

THE PAST IS TREACHEROUS, memory deceitful. But I do not lie when I say that this story is a true one.

I am Henry Sleep.

I recall these events at such length not out of some misguided nostalgia, but because of the boy who showed up in my office the other day: a slim red-headed child with eyes the size of saucers, and a ragged bear he clutched white-knuckled, like a talisman. No more than seven, he had the wide prominent bone structure of the woman who accompanied him, and a touch of her frail beauty, too: his mother, of course, also a red-head. She wore that expression you sometimes see on the faces of broken women: a wide-eyed look I've glimpsed in the eyes of headlight-dazzled deer. It was especially distressing on her, not only because of the lucid intelligence in her eyes, but because she reminded me of my mother. The furtive way she had of moving, maybe, like a dog that's been too often kicked; or the way she wouldn't meet my eyes when she talked.

"Redhead, deadhead, five cents a cabbage head," I told the boy, and I leaned forward to pluck a quarter from behind his ear.

I've picked up a few such tricks. They're helpful in this line of work. My hands are age-spotted now, not as swift as they used to be. But I still believe in magic.

This boy, this Eric — he was having nothing of it. He flinched when I extended my hand, and he would not take the coin when I proffered it. So I placed the quarter on the edge of my desk, where he could get it if he wanted it, and I listened to the story his mother had to tell.

I'd heard the story a thousand times or so — you have too, though maybe you didn't listen like you should have — but I listened anyway and it moved me, like it always does. When she finished, I made a phone call or two; I found her a place to stay in the shelter over in Princeton, and I promised her that Jesse wouldn't find her, though that's probably a lie.

When they stood to leave, I leaned over the desk once more. "Hey, carrot-top," I said. "What's that bear's name? If I'm going to be your

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lawyer, see, I got to know the names of all the folks with an interest in your case."

They paused by the door, looking back at me. I turned my head so I could see them better — out of the good eye, the right one.

"Go ahead, Eric," his mother said.

But still the boy didn't answer me. We just looked at one another until we came to an understanding. He had eyes like bright gems, I remember thinking. Eyes like bright gems in dark settings.

"That bear's name is Fred Howard," he said. He took a step forward when he said it. His features had taken on a set, defiant quality I thought I'd seen before.

"Fred Howard, huh?"

"That's right."

"Well you and Fred Howard come back and see me, okay?"

The boy gazed at me fixedly for another moment, and then his mother twitched his hand. They turned and saw themselves out, and that's when I noticed: the boy had hooked the coin off my desk, all right. He'd done it slicker than owl shit.

But his eyes — those eyes like bright gems — they lingered after him and seemed to illuminate my shabby office. I thought again of that look in his face, that look I knew I'd seen before. I didn't remember where at the time, but that night it came to me. It was the look in Jemmy E.'s face the last time I saw him: a look of defiance and hope and just a touch of desperation. It was the look of an opportunist who thinks that maybe, just maybe, he's found the way out. But mostly it was the look of fear.

JEMMY E. WAS RIGHT about one thing: talk travels fast in a place as small as Sauls Run. But he was wrong as well. My father served as sheriff of our county until he was sixty-three years old; he was re-elected to that office four times, an unprecedented run. To this day, he remains fondly remembered in these parts. A brass plaque in the courthouse commemorates him: *war hero, sheriff, beloved husband and father.* I stop to look at the plaque almost every day — my duties take me there — and every day I cannot help but wonder: How could they re-elect him year after year? How could they re-elect him when they knew?

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Jemmy E. was wrong. Talk travels quickly in a town the size of Sauls Run — but only sometimes. People never talk about the things that really matter, about the things that really stink. They cling to their illusions — that the child fell from the swing-set, that the mother hit herself with the corner of a kitchen cabinet. Without their illusions, they cannot survive.

A list of the guilty:

Miss Wickasham, my fifth grade teacher, who saw bruises and never said a word. The Millers, who lived next door. Casey Burroughs, my father's deputy. Reverend Wells, our church's pastor. Merrick Kennedy, who ran the pharmacy. Bill Honaker, my pediatrician. All the fellows who used to sit out front of the Grand Hotel, whittling and chewing the fat: J.C. Cade, Ed Goode, Tosack Burdette, Tillo, Luke Harvey, Wimpy Holland, Mack Asbury, Jack Catarussa. Slick the shoeshine man, who called me "Mistah Henry." The Widow Baumgarten, who taught piano. Deke Burton. Lucy James. Fanny Anderson. Lyle Nottingham. Francis Welland. All of them. All of them are guilty.

I am guilty.

You are.

A few years ago I decided to track down the circus that came to our town in that long-distant summer. I checked every reference book I could think to look at. I talked to every two-bit carny and circus roustabout I could find. I called a professor who knows about such matters at West Virginia University. Nothing. Bitterroot and Crabbe never existed according to any official register. No one has ever heard of a man named Quinn who was something more than a man.

The past is treacherous, memory deceitful. But I know that it is true.

Whenever a circus or a carnival comes to Sauls Run — whenever one comes near — I haunt the place. I seek it out. It's become known about town as an eccentricity of mine, on the order of the peculiar law practice I have built, if perhaps not quite as odd or inexplicable. My law practice caters almost exclusively to victims of abuse, women and children who rarely have a dime to meet my fees, who have left me impoverished, and wealthy beyond my wildest dreams of riches. Such a practice is entirely

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inexplicable to the people of this town; my penchant for haunting freak shows and circuses and carnivals and other such disreputable places is somewhat less so, but it too has been noted, and held as a mark against me.

But that's okay. I love the midway. I love the smell of exotic animals borne on a summer wind. I love the clowns and the jugglers and the bears on unicycles. I love them all. But that's not the reason I haunt such places. This is the reason:

I'm looking for a certain blond-haired child. I'm looking for Jemmy E. I have something I want to tell him.

Are you out there Jemmy E.?

Listen:

I didn't run away, Jemmy E. I didn't take Quinn's way. I stayed when it was hardest. I stayed and fought. And it has made all the difference to me.

"When I was just a few months old my parents went the divorce route, finding new mates and new agendas and I was raised by wolves."

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BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

I Still Miss My Man but My Aim Is Getting Better, by Sarah Shankman, Pocket Books, $21

THIS ONE came to me out of left field. In the mood for a mystery, I couldn't resist the title when I saw an ad for it in *Mystery Scene* and made a point of looking for it the next time I was in the local mystery book shop. Found it, bought it, brought it home. So far so good.

It's the story of an aspiring songwriter in Nashville, one Shelby Kay Tate, and it opens with her catching a glimpse of her estranged husband Leroy when she's on her way to a songwriting session. Life soon becomes complicated with Leroy trying to win her back; a Nashville patrolman falling hard for Shelby and wanting to protect her when Leroy's enthusiasm gets out of hand; Shelby inadvertently caught up as "the other woman" in a couple of relationships; Shelby meeting up with Patsy Cline's best friend who gave up her own music career when Cline died; and of course, all the while, Shelby's trying to get her career on track.

Shankman does an excellent job with her background of Nashville and the songwriter's business and she has a great gift for the voices of her characters. They all ring true, from Shelby and Leroy, fresh out of small-town Star, Mississippi, to a fast-talking conman named Mac McKenzie who has the most fascinating ability to justify any bad deed. There's no real mystery, but that's okay, because it's a fine read on its own. What's odd is that, about halfway through, one realizes the novel is unabashedly a contemporary fantasy.

For it turns out that when Patsy Cline's plane went down near Camden, Tennessee, on March 5, 1963, Shelby was the only girl child in the whole south born at that exact instant. So Patsy Angel has been looking out for Shelby all through her life, easing her toward Nashville and stardom. The problem is, just when things were starting to look up for Shelby, Rahab, one of the Seven Princes of Hell, decided to move in on Patsy Angel's territory

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and that's when the angel's, and hence Shelby's, troubles all began.

The concluding action of the book depends heavily upon coincidence and various madcap shenanigans to bring everybody together for Shelby's big night at Sutler's in Nashville where various talent agents and A&R scouts have promised to come see her play. Much danger seems imminent, but it's all in good fun. In fact, you could sum up the whole book as seriously good fun — easily fulfilling the promise of its title.

Idoru, by William Gibson, Putnam, $24.95

Sometimes the whole Cyberpunk phenomenon seems so tiring, all those derivative versions of Neuromancer having about as much life in their pages as did Gibson's own misstep into Victorian madcap fantasy so ably handled by Blaylock, Powers and Jeter before him. (I'm referring here to Gibson's 1990 collaboration with Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine*, which I notice doesn't even get a mention in the "Also by..." page in the new book, though his screenplay for *Johnny Mnemonic* is listed.)

But if Gibson can't write an original, or entertaining, "steampunk" novel, it takes the reader only a few pages into *Idoru* to remember why his science fiction has so often been emulated by other authors. It's quite astonishing how effortlessly he creates the novel's future milieu and characters, wasting no time, or excess wordage, plunging the reader directly into a story that for all its convoluted plotlines and dependency upon extrapolated technologies and world orders, is never confusing.

The action is told from alternating viewpoints, both related to the rock supergroup, Lo/Rez, in particular to a rumor circulating on the Internet that one of the duo, Rez, is planning to marry a woman named Rei Toei. The problem is Rei Toei is an idoru — a personality-construct AI software rather than a real woman. As for those viewpoint characters:

Colin Laney has the ability to connect seemingly unrelated data from the web to create accurate psychological profiles from the random day-to-day "signatures" everyone leaves as they go about their normal business: banking, shopping, traveling, paying their rent, etc. He's hired by Lo/Rez's security people to data-mine the truth of the rumor and hopefully explain what appears to be the most extreme antic yet in Rez's already outrageous career.

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Chia Pet McKenzie is also looking into the rumor, only she's a fourteen-year-old fan from Seattle who has flown to Japan as a representative of her chapter of the International Lo/Rez Fan Clúb, carrying with her one of those delightful throwaways that pepper Gibson's writing: a laptop made of recycled parts and gemstones by a commune in the Pacific Northwest. The history of the commune and some of the software on McKenzie' s laptop could make for a whole other story in their own right, but Gibson merely uses them to flavor the stew.

The two characters eventually come into contact with one another, but not before much danger and fascinating explorations into the world wide web, AIs, the power the media wields over celebrities, the security of our private data and other heady subjects. The future Gibson extrapolates here isn't quite as bleakly cast as in some of his other books, but while *Idoru* does show that Gibson has a playful side, it also addresses many serious concerns that are only beginning to affect our lives at the moment.

And the message is clear: If we don't deal with these issues now,

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within a very short time our rights as individuals will be systematically eroded to the point that those of us without the wealth and power of an elite few will have little or no control over our own lives.

The Venetian's Wife, by Nick Bantock, Chronicle Books, $22.95

Nick Bantock is the creator of the *Griffin & Sabine* books. I say creator because the dialogue between the two artists of the books' titles was mostly conducted by way of postcards and letters, with Bantock providing the art for the cards and their stamps, as well as the text for the messages. It made for a wonderful package; if you haven't already tried these books, I'd highly recommend them, and not simply for the art and design. Bantock also scripted an inventive storyline to hold it all together, one with more than a little of a fantastical resonance.

The Venetian's Wife introduces Sara Wolfe and her mysterious employer, Mr. N. Conti, who will only communicate with her by way of computer. Conti has hired Wolfe away from the museum where she works to help him reunite a collection of forty-two ancient Indian statues that have been scattered throughout the world. Wolfe is naturally somewhat reluctant to enter into an arrangement with someone who won't even meet with her in person, but she soon becomes convinced he's on the level and is intrigued enough to take the job. There are only a few statues left to find, and logically it would seem that Conti doesn't need Wolfe's help — unless he has another reason to involve her, and thereby hangs the tale.

The story is told through a dialogue between the two, conducted by email, along with pages from Wolfe's electronic diary, the journals of a Renaissance explorer, some gallery catalogues and other miscellany, all illustrated with appropriate "image files" which we see as illustrations on the book's pages.

I'd love to tell you more about the actual plot, but I'm afraid of giving away some of the surprises. Suffice it to say that *The Venetian's Wife* is as inventive as Bantock's earlier work and the art as lovely. As an author, Bantock could improve his characterization — though Wolfe and Conti aren't flat characters, neither are they fully-rounded — but that's a small bone to pick when the rest of the book is such a delight.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Brief Reviews: Books

Blade Runner 2: The Edge of Human, by K.W. Jeter, Bantam, $21.95

FOR ALL those old fossils who still insist a media tie-in novel can't be a good work of fiction in its own right, perhaps *Blade Runner 2: The Edge of Human* will change a few minds.

In order to extend his replicant lover Rachel's brief lifespan, fugitive Rick Deckard places her in suspended animation — then is forced into Blade Runner service again by Sarah Tyrell, heiress of the powerful Tyrell Corporation...and the human on whom Rachel has been based. Deckard must find one more escaped replicant, and along the way he encounters conspiracies and twists and surprises — including his half-dead former partner Dave Holden and another Roy Batty — that will make the reader's head spin, raising numerous questions about what is and isn't human, and how to tell the difference.

This is a sequel to both the film and the original book. Readers will be delighted to revisit the "chickenhead" android-animal repairman J.I. Isadore (from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) as well as his film-altered counterpart J.T. Sebastian. K.W. Jeter takes all the ingredients from Philip K. Dick, adds the lush resources from Ridley Scott, and combines them into a feast of imagination.

Blade Runner 2 is a serious novel, well written and imaginative, which builds an ambitious and appropriate story from an already-existing foundation. It remains faithful to its roots and becomes a story Jeter can call his own.

The Galactic Gourmet, by James White, Tor, $22.95

James White received well-deserved recognition as Guest of Honor at the 1996 World SF Con-

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vention in Anaheim. Quite appropriate too, as his novels and stories — particularly those involving Sector General, a galactic hospital serving many species of intelligent life — are veritable Disneylands of delight, wonder, and odd characters.

The Galactic Gourmet, his latest, describes the amiable if often hair-(cilia? tentacle?) raising efforts of the six-legged alien chef Gurronseva's efforts not merely to cater to the nutritional needs of the myriad patients in the hospital, but to perform his duties in a gustatorially transcendent fashion. Julia Child meets *St. Elsewhere* in outer space.

True, the plot is not so much picaresque as meandering. But the recipes are fascinating and the puzzles and adventures are treats as Gurronseva deals with challenges not just with thyme but time, space, and non-barbecue-based biology.

Murder in the Solid State, by Wil McCarthy, Tor, $22.95

Wil McCarthy's work has been likened to Robert A. Heinlein's. Perhaps comparison to other writers in John W. Campbell's stable might be more appropriate: Randall Garrett or Mack Reynolds, perhaps. In McCarthy's latest novel, *Murder in the Solid State*, this particularly holds true as its striking quality is not so much the fascinating "hard" science as the canny use of "hard-boiled" focused prose and keen sense of pacing smuggled into the sf pulps via the detective pulps.

David Sanger is a nanotech physicist in a future far enough to hold speculative science made real, but close enough to harbor contemporary characters. He is framed for a murder at a science conference. His roller coaster efforts to prove his innocence and solve scientific puzzles at the same time form the novel's breathless plot.

This might have worked better as a novella, as the momentum occasionally grows monotonous. However, any author with the knack for tight, vivid writing and good sf mystery in an often clueless field should be applauded.

Project Gutenberg CD-ROM, by various authors, Walnut Creek CDROM, $39.95

Project Gutenberg is a non-profit effort to translate great public-domain works of literature, science, and fact into computer-readable form. Among the more than

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350 texts on this Macintosh/DOS disk are classic works of sf, fantasy, and horror by such authors as Carroll, Dickens, Stevenson, Irving, Wells, Verne, Shelly, Doyle, Stoker, and Burroughs. The search and display software included is rather crude, but the text is the important thing here. While this may not be the ticket for casual reading, it's a useful research tool, and an invaluable pocket-sized library for the student.

Ringworld Throne, by Larry Niven, Ballantine Books, $24.95

This is Ringworld 301. If you haven't read the prerequisites, the original *Ringworld* and *Ringworld Engineers*, and read them recently, don't even try this, the third installment in the trilogy. Even then, the opening is thick, slow, going, a situation not helped by typical Ringworld names (a yard long, and unpronounceable). Fans of the series will be rewarded for their perseverance however, as Niven delves into the history, cultures, and people of the Ringworld. Despite its flaws, this is a welcome and overdue return to one of science fiction's greatest fictional worlds.

Voices of Hope, by David Feintuch, Warner Aspect, $5.99

If you know the Seafort saga, you know what to expect here: a slam-bang action adventure novel revolving around the family that saved Earth from alien invaders. If you're not familiar with the earlier novels you'll have no trouble getting up to speed, but you might be put off by the difficult passages written in the dialect of New York's underclass, or by the oft-used overstory. In a nutshell: The rich and powerful are once again exploiting the poor, grinding them down and forcing them underground to the point where "upper" and "lower" class have become literal descriptions. The Seaforts take the side of the poor, and become enmeshed in political intrigue and personal danger.

The good bits are in the details: Feintuch manages to put tons of original setting into that ancient framework, and he's got a flair for action that will keep you reading right along.

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In addition to F&SF, *Mary Turzillo's stories have appeared in* The Ultimate Witch, SF Age, Interzone, Tomorrow, *and* Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine. *Her poetry has appeared in* Asimov's. *She has written non-fiction books about Philip José Farmer and Anne McCaffrey.*

"Mate" is a story about chess. Mary believes that in the next fifty years, as child-rearing practices change, women players will begin to dominate the world of competitive chess, making it very popular indeed. Her own interest in chess dates from grade school and is, she says, surpassed only by her complete lack of talent for the game.

Mate

By Mary A. Turzillo

SOPHIA, FIGHTING HER WAY to the top, had played some crazy chess, but this Ron character was weird as a kewpie doll in a row of pawns.

While he sweated over his move, Sophia glanced around the ballroom of the new Cleveland Omni, chandelier-lit and carpeted in garnet-red to muffle hushed voices. Even from the platform set up for board one, she smelled the tension from the other players. And they should be tense, competing for guaranteed prize money (donated by an insurance firm to counter its cold image) of a quarter million dollars. That kind of money might intimidate a less sensible girl.

Unexpectedly, Ron spoke. "Is it true your father hired image consultants to make you homely so romance wouldn't distract you from being the world's greatest chess player?"

Sophia looked up, startled. He was using up time on his clock, not hers. But what a bizarre question!

"Certainly not," she said firmly. She pushed the sleeves of her

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cardigan up and scowled, thinking, *if I had a mother, she'd say, "Darling, don't look so sour."*) She was not homely. At least not very homely. Plain; a normal twenty-year-old girl. Anyway, how could she concentrate on chess if men were always chasing her?

Ron moved, a very odd move. She had thought him a better player — in fact, he had two wins and a draw so far in the tournament — but advancing his g-pawn at this point seemed useless. Maybe it was some obscure defense, though she'd studied them all.

Daddy saw to that.

She glanced at her clock. Plenty of time. She moved her bishop out, pinning the knight which he had managed to advance to a semi-threatening position. Next, she would castle. Unless he did something else bizarre.

"And is it true that he used to lock you in your nursery with a Novag Ragnarok chess-machine and not give you dinner until you mated it with a new opening?"

"I'm going to ask the arbiter to make you stop these harassing remarks," she said. Why was he watching her so, so *soulfully*? He had pretty blue eyes. No, he didn't! He was a boring, dilettante player, some kind of genetic engineer by trade, and she would trounce him just as she had several grandmasters.

His eyes had flecks of turquoise around the pupils. And he had a sweet smile.

No, he didn't. It was the soft lighting.

"Your clock is running," she said almost soundlessly.

His hand (well-groomed and yet masculine, a hand that might be pleasant to hold while dancing or watching the sunset) (stop that!) moved toward the knight, then winced back, as if he hadn't noticed the pin. He advanced a pawn to back up the knight.

Well, that's feeble, she thought, and castled. No, wait! It must be a trick! He was trying to make her think he was stupid, planning to use the Proserpina variation, because, because ....

Too late. Ron moved the h-pawn forward.

Ah ha. The Proserpina variation. She had expected this, thought of several strong retorts. Masterfully, she used her rook to pin his bishop. What had happened to his game? She searched his face for signs of strain. A pleasant face, not handsome, but intelligent. A face you could

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trust. Calm. Not stressed.

Ron moved another pawn out.

That move was not in the Proserpina variation. She glanced at the display board. It looked like a game between two amateurs. After a moment's thought, she slammed her queen into a central square. "Check," she said coolly.

Ron's blue gaze flickered to the board and then to her eyes. He was using up time like there was no tomorrow. Why wasn't he concerned? She had a mate in seven moves, six if he made another childish mistake, and he wasn't even sweating.

He smiled apologetically and moved his other knight between her queen and his king. He had managed to get all his major pieces pinned now. No, not pinned. This one was lost. She took the knight.

He sat looking at her, motionless, his clock running, then grabbed her queen.

Her heart did a somersault. How in the name of Caissa and all Her handmaidens had she missed that? She tried to look casual, as if the loss was a deliberate sacrifice. She glanced at her clock. Time to calm down, study the game, stop gazing in this infernal fool's pretty blue eyes.

He smiled, tremulously. She suddenly noticed that the pattern on his necktie was not a pattern.

It was a picture of her.

Calm down. She felt Daddy's reassuring gaze on her. He always sat in the first row and smiled every time she made a good move. Daddy was a fine player, though not as good as she, of course.

A whole minute had elapsed on her clock.

The game was out of control. How could she have made such a stupid blunder? Once Ryumin had lost his queen, blundering against Capobianco, but —

Ah.

"That move was illegal," she said. "You're in check from the bishop now."

Arbiters converged on them and set the pieces back where they belonged.

"Thank you," mumbled Ron.

"For what?"

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"Not telling them I was distracting you."

"Don't do it anymore." She folded her arms and sat ramrod straight in the big chair that smelled of new leather.

He averted his gaze as if trying not to smile.

After far too long, he moved a rook one space over. Another ridiculous move. He looked helplessly at her.

She wanted to be angry. She was a game ahead of Warmodo, the other major competitor in this tournament, and this fool was making a mish-mash of their game. Best destroy him quickly. She drove her own bishop deep into his territory.

At last he seemed to rally. He offered a knight in exchange for the bishop. She considered briefly; if she didn't finish him off soon, the game would adjourn and he'd have time to rest and reconsider his stupidity.

She felt Daddy's eyes on her from his seat below the platform. The knight-bishop exchange wasn't exactly a trap, but she could see that he'd wind up in better command of crucial squares, so she threatened his queen with a rook.

He sighed.

"If you persist in sighing like that, I really will call the arbiter," she whispered.

"I can't help it," he said. "If I resign, will you go out to dinner with me?"

Her first impulse was to throw something at him, possibly the whole board.

Her second impulse was to call the arbiter and have him reprimanded.

Her third impulse was to look him over carefully. Nice hands. Pretty eyes, full of apology. Or was it challenge? A silly, short nose. Ears like a hamster. Sweet, earnest smile.

"Just play," she said.

He narrowed his eyes and scooted his rook across home row. "Check," he said, smiling.

Why, oh why, had she not called the arbiter? He had been flirting with her! Flirting, to distract her, and now she had allowed him to get her in check!

But she had more time left on her clock than he, so she took a deep breath and surveyed the damage.

"You're sighing," he said.

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She glared.

"What pretty amber eyes you have," he said.

Furious, she suddenly saw how she could take the offending rook with a bishop. She did so, knowing she was sacrificing the bishop.

She sank back smirking, ready with her next move after he took the bishop.

He didn't take it.

"How about a draw?" he said.

She straightened the cuffs of her very plain white blouse and looked down her nose at him. "When imps dance in paradise."

He tipped his king over.

She closed her eyes and took a long breath. It was a dishonorable victory. He was trying to get her to go out with him.

But why? Her own father had told her many times she was a plain little rat-faced woman, with no saving graces except her fine mind. Thank the goddess Caissa she could play chess, Daddy always said, because she'd never have any other of life's pleasures.

She got up, straightened her gray skirt, and trudged off the platform, her black oxfords slipping in the deep carpet.

He hastened after her. In the elegant gray hallway outside the ballroom, he said, "We could have Bananas Foster for dessert."

She turned on him. "Who told you about Bananas Foster?"

A smile flickered across his face. "I did some research."

"I will not go to dinner with you. But," and she tried not to look too interested in him, "why did you play so badly? People will suspect you threw the game."

"Sophia," he said softly. "I wanted to meet you for years. I'm not that good a player, really, but I studied. I worked. Neglected my research. You have such a lovely face, so tragic..."

"Tragic!" She backed against the plush gray wall.

"Your mother dead; your father unknown."

Hair on the back of her head prickled. "Daddy is not unknown."

"He's never told you? He paid your mother to bear you, used semen from a donor whose ancesters, like hers, were great spatial thinkers. Certainly better than he."

She felt color rise in her cheeks. She wanted to hate this fool, yet

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something about the anonymous elegance of the hallway — or maybe it was his earnestness — stopped her from slapping him.

"Daddy and I have our secrets," she said.

"It must be hard, raised by a monomaniac," he said. "I mean, I'm sure you love each other, but — "

She closed her eyes and slowed her breathing, trying to ignore his clean-laundry scent. "Who told you such outrageous lies?"

"And maybe the DNA came from several donors. I'm sorry."

She suddenly felt like she had been grown in a Petri dish.

Ron said, "It must be hard — "

"Hard? How could you know what it's like? Not knowing how to ride a bike, because on a bike I could ride all over and neglect my end-game studies! He caught me playing house with the black queen and the white king, and the pawns as children. He made me play on a computer a full year after that! I wanted a ballerina doll for my eighth birthday. Know what he said? He said don't get stupid ideas about dance lessons because there's no time."

"You'd be a lovely dancer," mumbled Ron, glancing back at the chandelier-lit ballroom.

But she was just getting wound up. "No dolls! No flying nun doll, no astronaut doll, no Margaret Thatcher doll! A boy in my algebra class kissed me when I was thirteen. Daddy found out and took me out of school. Out of school! He home-schooled me all the way through high school! I don't even have a driver's license, because he — "

Suddenly, Daddy strode up to them, his approach a surprise in the expensively sound-proofed hallway. She realized just then how much he looked like a drug-crazed Santa Claus. He stopped in front of Sophia and glared at her. "Is this man bothering you, Sophia?"

Sophia felt her stomach spasm and her legs go weak. "No, Daddy. We were just discussing the game."

"A very strange game indeed," roared Daddy. "And what have you to say for yourself?" He seized Ron by his tie, apparently unaware of the image of Sophia on it.

Ron pulled himself up to his full height — almost as tall as Daddy — and glared back. "I was discussing our plans for the evening, sir. Your adorable and brilliant daughter is considering having dinner with me."

"She is *not* adorable, and she is *not* free for dinner!" said Daddy.

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Ron jerked his necktie away. "She most certainly is adorable, despite your attempts to make her look like a sexless mummy, sir."

Sophia's mouth was so dry she could hardly speak, but she managed to say, "Daddy doesn't like me discussing games with other players without him present, Ron, so — "

"Oh, bullshit," said Ron. "Sophia, have you heard of Elizabeth Barrett Browning? Her tyrant father persuaded her that she was an invalid, until Robert Browning came along and — "

Sophia looked pleadingly. "Ron, I think it's best if — "

"Let me handle this," said Daddy. "I shall complain of your behavior to the arbiters. I saw you harass my daughter. And the game you played! A disgrace! You call yourself a chess player."

"Daddy," said Sophia timidly, "he did win a lot of games before I played against him."

"An imposter!" said Daddy. His voice echoed down the hallway.

"Actually," said Ron, "I'm only a moderately good amateur. But I'm a hell of a neural net engineer."

Sophia blanched. "That's illegal!"

"How so?"

"You're using a computer?"

"Not externally. The programming network is incomporated into bacterial DNA."

"Your brain is infected with those nano-bacterial computer chips?"

"It was. I designed these with the best chess AI programs available. I'm very very good at that."

Daddy snorted. "No AI player has ever beaten my daughter."

"No. But with a neural net augmenting the brain of a moderately good human player — " He shrugged and smiled apologetically.

"The arbiters will not allow this!" said Daddy, his face black with rage. "It's a mechanical aid, even if it's in your brain!"

"Do the arbiters allow a gene-spliced player, bred for the game, like your daughter? They'll have to deal with my bacterial AI eventually. I plan to make an announcement about this technology tomorrow, since I've accomplished my objective."

"What objective, you upstart oaf?" Daddy clenched his fists.

"To meet Sophia. She was such a darling little girl, back in those early

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tournaments. The press loved her. So cute! And she grew up beautiful. Despite your attempts to make her homely, sir. I wonder you didn't throw acid in her face."

Daddy's fleshy face went that white color it got when he was about to have one of his spells. "Come away, darling," he said. *Darling*: the word was a weapon on his lips, though nobody but Sophia could hear the menace. "I'll have this unsportsmanlike cheat barred from the game."

"That's all right," said Ron softly. "I never mean to play in competition again."

Sophia allowed weakness and fear to wash over her. Daddy had her by the wrist and was tugging her away. He tucked her hair behind her ears and buttoned the top button of her blouse. An observer would have mistaken it for tenderness. She bowed her head and hunched her shoulders, ready to follow Daddy, like an abused puppy.

Ron held a hand out to her, and when she extended her palm, he dropped the white king into it.

She smiled timidly and looked into his eyes. So friendly. He had lied, sort of, just as Daddy had. Yet, somehow his smile suggested she could trust him. "Daddy," she said, feeling her voice dry and weak. "I agreed to go to dinner with Ron. I'll be back — I'm not sure when."

She took Ron's hand. It was, as she expected, warm and firm.

"Sophia," said Daddy, and it was a plea. But then his eyes went hard with rage and impatience, and she knew where she would go.

"He probably does love you," said Ron, as they walked past the fountain into the lobby.

"Probably," she said. Her heart was light and reckless, and she wondered if there was a store open where she could buy a red dress at this time of evening. Then, "Why did you throw the game?"

"I didn't. I'm just not that good a player."

"But the bacterial AI — you won all those other games. I was truly afr — *respectful* of you, until you started to blunder."

He smiled and pulled a vial out of his pocket. "I couldn't use the bacterial AI when I played against you."

She took the vial and looked at it. "Penicillin," it read. "500 mg. Take as directed."

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Richard Bowes has sold three novels and is marketing his fourth, Minions of the Moon, *based in part on the stories he's published in* F&SF *since 1992. His short fiction has also appeared in* Tomorrow, Full Spectrum, The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, *and* The Best from Fantasy & Science Fiction.

"Drink and the Devil" is an urban fantasy that mingles modern problems with ancient mythologies — a specialty of Richard Bowes.

Drink and the Devil

By Richard Bowes

ONE

ONCE, I FOUND MYSELF crouched in the chill dark of the back of a van, alone except for my Shadow and a corpse called Lucky. "Maybe if we asked Lucky," my Shadow murmured in my ear, "he'd say he was here keeping watch on a dead man and a doppelgänger." As that sank in, the van door opened and I reached for the .25 in my belt. What I touched was my bare hip, which made me think I must be laid out in a morgue.

Startled awake, I discovered my legs tangled in sheets and the city warm and silent at first light on a September Sunday in 1975. The pistol, the van and Lucky's corpse were bits of unwelcome debris from the place where memory and dreams cross. I told myself, "The past has no control over the present," and repeated that mantra several times. Gradually, the scared junky, the numb drunk that was me in the van, faded.

Still, I remained motionless, held my breath, tried to sense another presence in the room. Because, while the rest was the stuff of nightmares,

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my Shadow was very real. He haunted me with rude dreams and insomnia as he had for fifteen years, as he haunts me now twenty-one years later.

Only when I was sure I was alone did I remember my pain. Leo Dunn lay in the hospital. He was the one who called my Shadow my Silent Partner, who taught me to see him as a parasite, as the embodiment of my addiction. When I told myself that the past has no control over the present, it was Mr. Dunn's voice I heard.

With him, I had learned to live with what I couldn't control. I just wasn't sure I could live without him. Getting up, I pulled on last night's cruising jeans and went into my front room. A pin of light shone in the sky above Alphabet City, the last of Sirius, the Dog Star. First Avenue was as empty as it only gets at that hour of that day.

Then the phone rang. My first reaction was that my Silent Partner was calling to twist me around. My second was that they were calling to tell me that Mr. Dunn was dead. Not until the third ring was I able to pick it up. After that it took some moments until I could croak, "Hello."

A guy, unrecognizable because he was unexpected, said, "Kevin Grierson? Hey, hope I didn't wake you."

"I'm awake." I was still tensed for horror or tragedy.

"I need to talk," said the caller, sounding like my listening was a service to which he was entitled.

That's when I recognized Damian. Bad news, but not the kind I had expected. Damian of Darian as I called him was Dunn's most recent client, maybe his last. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I can't sleep, man." Damian was a twenty-one-year-old drunk. He was also a hit and run driver. Wanting to show the court that his client was re-formed, his lawyer had put him in touch with Leo Dunn. "People are saying I should be taught a lesson. Like their own kids are angels," he whined.

"Isn't Mrs. Dunn seeing you?" Leo Dunn's wife also worked with alcoholics and addicts.

"It's so early, man. I mean she's been great, but it's Sunday and..."

With a twinge, I realized that the year before, in the midst of my own troubles, I had not been much concerned about jolting an elderly couple awake. "What's the problem?"

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"I didn't know she was there. I would have stopped. I didn't believe it when they busted me. Now they say she won't walk again." One night that June, Damian, home from college, drunk at the wheel, hit a girl, broke both her knees and drove off without stopping. Bad mistake. Her parents were more important in Connecticut than his were.

His voice cracked. "They want to put me in jail." Damian's profound concern was for his nice white ass.

Mr. Dunn had told me, "You're only ten years older than he, not fifty, closer to his experience. Talk to him, Kevin."

The kid aroused no kindness in me. "I don't think they'll put you away. But if they do, it won't be for long. A few months. Cut your hair off and request protective lock up. You'll be all right."

"I guess jail's okay if you're a faggot," he said and I wanted to slam the phone down.

But probably this was Mr. Dunn's way of keeping us both out of trouble. So, I took a very deep breath. "The important thing is you stay sober so the judge can see what a model citizen you are."

As I spoke, I remembered the reality behind my recent nightmare. I had been a few years older than Damian when Lucky died. He was the connection of choice, a classic junky, emaciated, filthy. But he made home deliveries. Then he o.d.'d in an apartment where I was staying.

"So, what do you do instead of drinking?" Damian wanted to know.

"You find something. You've got no choice. Like me, you don't have a real talent for crime."

"Did you ever get sent to jail?"

"No." I was about to say, "I was lucky." I changed that to, "Dumb good fortune." I couldn't resist adding, "The kind you don't seem to be having."

Lucky had turned out to be no more than cold bones in thin denims. We put him in a garbage bag and loaded him in the back of a van. Boris, my best friend, said, "Kevin, the altar boy, drives. He looks like every cop's little brother." Carl, the punk who loved me, wanted to ride up front too. "No. We get in back," said Boris. "One Irish guy. Minimum suspicion."

My skin crawled at the memory. I told Damian, "The important thing is to remember what getting stoned has done to you in the past."

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"You're better off now?" Probably all the kid wanted was to be told there was life after booze. But what I heard was a question I'd been asking myself, "What are you doing with your new, sober life?"

"Things are okay. You staying straight, Damian?"

"Shit yes. My girl broke up with me after I got arrested. Everybody I used to hang around with thinks it's a bore that I don't get stoned. Why else am I on the phone with you? I would have found something better to do if I was high."

Years before I had driven Lucky down the dark streets of what would become Tribeca. Boris was wrong, I didn't ride alone. Deep in the night when I was about to roll through a red light at a deserted corner, a hand pointed. A cop car sat motionless at a curb and my Shadow, my tougher twin, whispered. "Relax. The cops are snoring. Just don't wake them up." When we left Lucky on a loading dock, the bag fell open; his empty eyes stared right into mine. I alone had heard my Shadow's laughter as I shuddered.

"Kevin?" Damian was calling into the phone. "Talk to me." This came out as an involuntary plea. "I mean I haven't been able to sleep all night. What do you find to think about?"

I looked out the window. Down the avenue came a single figure pushing a shopping cart. "Well," I told him. "Right now, there's this bag woman walking south on First Avenue against the traffic. She's pushing one cart, hauling a wagon full of stuff. She's unstoppable. I kind of admire her."

"That's stupid."

"A smart person wouldn't have picked up the phone at six in the morning." But it seemed stupid to me also. The woman was crazy. She was going to get run over.

"I think it's put me to sleep. Thanks."

"Good. See you." Hanging up, I knew I hadn't given the kid what he needed. I lacked Mr. Dunn's magic. I couldn't love him because of what he was or even despite who he was. Against all odds, Mr. Dunn had managed to do that for me. At times like that morning, I realized that such love was a miracle.

It had been sixteen months since I'd gotten high. As I bought the *Times* and some onion bagels, as I drank tea and tried to do the crossword

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puzzle, as I took a bath and dressed for work, I wondered what would become of me.

The streets at noon were alive with Fall adrenaline and Summer weather. St. Vincent's Hospital, by comparison, was serene, nothing but the hum of fans, the murmurs of the ladies at the reception desks. Long, cool Catholic corridors were lined with plaster saints and virgins in niches, paintings of powerful clergy and generous laity.

Upstairs, the cardiac ward was air conditioned and the halls were chilly. Gentle voices came through half closed doors, "So hard to believe this happened, to me," a woman sighed. At Mr. Dunn's end of the hall there was quiet commotion.

Staff clustered around Kendall Madison, Leo Dunn's private nurse. Elegant and black in an immaculate white uniform, he held up a finger and said, "No, only one is a bishop. The other is a monsignor, his secretary." Seeing me, he gave a wink.

The door to Mr. Dunn's room opened, revealing a movement of black cloth against white sheets and walls. "And now, Leo, I'm going to give you the episcopal blessing," said a light, fruity voice. Mr. Dunn mumbled something that I couldn't hear and there was a low murmur, a sound like water going down a drain, a veteran priest running through a familiar formula.

"Good-bye, Leo. I'm sure you'll be up and around by the time I'm back in New York," said the bishop in a normal speaking voice. "It seems that every day I use what I learned from you. The Record Room, the Silent Partner, the Four Virtues." By this I guessed that his Grace too had been one of Mr. Dunn's clients.

Out the door came two pink, well-nourished faces, two pairs of gold-rimmed glasses. Kendall Madison, it turned out, was a prelate groupie. "Oh, I'm sure this will be such a comfort to him, your Grace." Bishop and monsignor exchanged delighted little smiles when Kendall bowed to kiss the episcopal ring.

As the visitors were escorted to the elevator by a flurry of nuns, Kendall said, "Come in and talk to him, Kevin." I went into the room with a smile. By then, I was used to Mr. Dunn's being so thin and so pale, with hands like dry bones when I grasped them and skin as white as his hair. But the eyes were alive. And that day they absolutely danced.

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Kendall bustled around straightening the sheets. "Leo, you had a VERY important visitor."

"I know, Kendall. I am as stunned by it as you," and they both laughed.

Another nurse, his hair long and processed, wearing an earring, stuck his head in the door. "Was that a CARDINAL?"

Kendall put his finger to his lips and ushered his friend outside to review the whole matter.

"Episcopal blessings from the Bishop of Syracuse." Mr. Dunn laughed. "Things must be worse than I thought. Bill is an old friend. When I met him, he was a parish priest about your age."

"Getting ripped on the Sacramental wine?"

"Every trade has its risks." Then he was serious. "Have you talked to Damian?"

"Yeah. He's okay. Having trouble sleeping. You're looking great."

"We're trying to get me out of here and back home. I need to work with people again." Mr. Dunn's problem was a simple one. His heart was bad and had to be operated on. But his kidneys were failing so they couldn't operate.

"Damian appreciates your help. Even if he doesn't always show it. You're a good man, Kevin." He had told me that so often that I had, against all available evidence, come to believe it. "Do you work today?"

"I have to open the store at one. I wondered if you needed anything."

"Just to see you, my friend. My wife will be down shortly. And the kids." He looked at me carefully. "Bad dreams?" He knew. "Kevin, I was on the street for years and willing to do anything for the next drink. That comes back to me too in my sleep. But that is not who we are anymore. The past has no hold on us. We are free, you and I. Uniquely free."

Getting up to go, I said, "Sorry to be like this."

"Don't be. It keeps me in shape."

As I handed in my visitor's pass downstairs, I noticed an old gray fedora. It was perched on the head of a tiny man with eyes bright as a malicious child's. But it was the hat, not the face, that brought a name to mind: Francis X. MacLunahan. Tiny, in a threadbare striped suit, he looked thoroughly at home loitering in a lobby.

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He placed me also though we had met only briefly the year before. "And how," he asked, "is the great man, himself?"

"Real well," I said because it seemed that would disappoint him.

MacLunahan tapped a coat pocket, came close and said confidentially, "I have a present he would not have shunned once upon a time." I saw the outline of a pint bottle. "Is that jigaboo fairy still standing guard?"

"Fuck off." The ladies at the information desk looked at me, surprised, and didn't seem to notice MacLunahan and his bottle at all.

Out in that West Village forenoon, guys, in pairs and in clusters, flushed and dazed, some of them very available, wandered back from Saturday night at the discos with tambourines around their necks. But I couldn't get MacLunahan out of my mind. He lingered tiny and disturbing in the seamier byways of my memory.

The first time I met him was the morning after a relapse. I had summoned my Shadow and gone on a mad rampage a couple of months after I started with Leo Dunn. That poor man, probably sick even then, had to come down to my cellar dive in Chelsea and pry me off the floor.

Then he said, "Let's fix you up, Kevin," and got me in a cab. We drove past the sprawl of the Port Authority to the Market Diner, the heart of Irish Hell's Kitchen. The Market was a place where the road met the city. Cross country truckers and thugs ate their steak and eggs, drank their shots and beer. Cops' radios blasted in the takeout line.

Anyone seeing us walk in would have thought we were a distinguished criminal lawyer saddled with some friend's black sheep boy as a client. I had the painful look of a guy who has done himself damage on the street. Mr. Dunn, on the other hand, tall and smiling, wore a gray suit and a blue shirt that matched his eyes. A waitress about fifty with a blond beehive and wing glasses spotted him and said, "Leo!"

"Dorry! How's it going with Jack?'

"Bearable, which is a lot more than I could say before. Kevin," she told me when we had been introduced, "this is a great man. I got a son about your age who is only walking the earth because of him. Now, what can I do for youse?"

"Coffee for myself. But my friend needs the works." Dorry nodded her understanding and departed.

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My stomach lurched. I excused myself and went to the men's room, splashed water on my face, tried to get my insides to lie down. "Hey," someone whispered. I looked up and there I was twice, the tangled hair, the two days' growth of beard, the bruise on the chin. Only the bloodshot eyes were different. Mine were scared and angry. His were clever and desperate. "I guess," my Shadow murmured, "that you're ready to send me away."

"Why can't you just die?"

"You have any idea what my life is like without you? I mostly float in what feels like a long junk doze. Then every once in a while, the soles of my feet, my fingers, tingle. And that means you're ready again to start living enough for two. Without you, there's hardly any me. Without me, you're nothing. But together? Together, we make a pretty fair psychopath. Think of that, Kevin, in your dull routine."

Before he could talk his way around me, I said, "Go." Just like that he disappeared. A trucker came out of one of the stalls and gave me a weird look. I left wondering how much of the conversation he'd heard. Only my side? Or that and the whispers of my Shadow?

At our booth, Dorry was saying, "Coffee AND toast for you, Leo, since you look like you ain't eating. Coffee for you too, kid. But first." She handed me a bubbling glass and a saucer with aspirin and a couple of other pills. The two of them watched until I had taken them all.

"What's wrong, Kevin?" Mr. Dunn asked when we were alone.

"I just saw my Silent Partner. I told him to get lost."

Mr. Dunn sighed, looked out at the blank wall of the United Parcel building across the street. I knew it bothered him when I spoke of the Silent Partner as real. Psychosis was something about which he could do nothing. "Sorry."

"Don't ever be. You hired me to help you. If there's a failure, it's mine. Now we're going to begin again."

Then he looked up and his eyes widened. "I believe you were sent by God to teach me humility. Forget my doubting the existence of your Silent Partner. Maybe we all have them. If so, here comes mine."

"Leo," said the little man under the battered gray fedora. "A word with you?" I caught the scent of stale cigars and fresh booze. "I hope I am not interrupting."

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"Indeed, you are, Francis. I see that reports of your demise were sadly exaggerated."

Extending his hand to me, the other man said, "Francis X. MacLunahan, Esquire." Small, furtive, threadbare, he was a kind of reverse image of Leo Dunn. He looked at me closely and it seemed he too recognized something. "Young man, it often happens in this life that one needs a lawyer. If that is your case..."

Mr. Dunn cut him off. It was the only time I ever saw him rude. "I'll see you in a moment, Francis."

As MacLunahan faded back, Dunn told me, "Your Silent Partner wants everything, your money, your health, your peace of mind. The further you give in to booze and drugs, the less of you there is, the stronger he becomes."

He glanced to where MacLunahan seemed about to blend into the diner doorway. "I contributed money a few years ago for his funeral. My guess is that on the strength of his having been a companion in my drinking days and later having defrauded me, this particular Silent Partner wants a hundred dollars." He rose up, saying, "I'll give him twenty, since that's what I can spare." Maybe MacLunahan stuck in my mind because we met in the aftermath of my last bender, the last time my Silent Partner and I had words.

That Sunday I unlocked the gates of OLD ACQUAINTANCE, an antique shop deep in the West Village. The past had no control over the present but, somehow, I was working in an antique store. It would be a quiet day. Sammi, the store cat, came over to be fed and to be scratched a bit but not too much.

Sammi had been found on the street a few years before. She carried off the mix of fey and feral much better than I did. Customers were pleasant but gingerly with both of us.

Towards closing, Scott, age ten, son of a former girl friend, rolled in on his skateboard and announced that he was to be called SZ10 from now on. Sarah, his mother, showed up a few minutes later and we went to her place for supper. She asked about Mr. Dunn, about Madge Hollings, my boss and a friend of hers. I asked about a guy she was seeing and mostly remembered to call Scott SZ10. She said someone named George Halle said he had met me and asked her some questions.

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Sarah and I skirted discussion of what I was doing with my life.

Not much. Because I could sign for deliveries as well as carry things up from the cellar, Madge called me manager and paid a little extra. She had gone through two husbands and seen both her daughters suitably married. In idle moments she tried to teach me the business. "Feel the grain of the carving on this armoire," she'd say. "That's hand tooled. The texture can't be faked." My eyes glazed and she sighed.

Like an irregularly shaped room, my future was a puzzle for her to solve. "Kevin, you're not a bad looking kid and you're bright." She was being kind. I was a kid only in the show biz sense of having no serious credits. If I was bright, it was in no particular direction. I would be thirty-two on my next birthday. My nose was bent, I had scars and several gray hairs. I debated growing a beard to hide some of the damage.

"We have to find you a wife," said Madge one day. "Or a husband." She chuckled at my expression and said nothing more. A week later, she said, "Kevin, there's an auction preview over at Glueck and Chomfrey." She adjusted the collar of my jacket. "Stop in after lunch and see if anything interests you." I never spot set-ups until afterwards.

First I went by St. Vincent's where Mr. Dunn sat carefully positioned to show his best angle to visitors. Kendall said, "We have him all ready to play Leo Dunn in the movie."

The most recent news seemed good. They were talking about letting him go home. "I'll be better able to rest until I'm strong enough for them to operate," he said. Then to Kendall, "Tell him who it is that's coming to visit."

"Spenser and Lettie Towns! Of Newport and Palm Springs. He owns race horses. She writes the words for photo books about mansions. Sister Roberta reads the society pages. She knew all about them. She asked which of them had the drinking problem. She also says you are not leaving until you start eating."

Just then a doctor in a lab coat entered. I went outside where there stood a tall and beautifully tanned couple. Mrs. Dunn introduced the Towns before she stepped into the room. "Kevin Grierson," she said. "Kevin, worked with Leo."

They smiled their approval. I won't deny that it felt good. "Congratulations!" He shook my hand.

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She said, "Meeting Leo was our greatest piece of good luck. How long have you known him?'

"Since...." I saw a tiny figure with a fedora and a pint bottle sticking out of his raincoat pocket.

"My God!" said Spenser Towns.

His wife looked where he did and asked, "What?" as Francis X. MacLunahan, saw us, tipped his hat, turned and was gone.

"That horrible little man that Leo tried to help. Mac something. That lawyer who cheated him so badly. We could never discover his name in any state bar association."

"But don't I remember him dying?" Lettie Towns obviously saw nothing. She sounded concerned, baffled. For an instant I caught the whole drama of a drinker and his wife. Then the door of Leo Dunn's room opened and he emerged walking slowly between Mrs. Dunn and Kendall.

Doppelgängers, Shadows, were on my mind as I went east. I thought of Mr. Dunn saying, "Your Silent Partner wants to leave you just alive enough to want the next drink," and I thought of MacLunahan and his bottle.

On Broadway just above the gentle curve at Grace Church was a casual loiterer, a man my size and build in a filthy overcoat too warm for the day. Something in the way he stood was so familiar that my guts froze. Then he turned and revealed the dark, raddled face of a stranger.

I hurried in under the sign GLUECK AND CHOMFREY, ESTATE APPRAISALS AND AUCTIONS. There, either Chomfrey or Glueck, I could never tell them apart, handed me a catalog with a cover that read *Household Furnishings of the Kavanaugh's of Dobbs Ferry*, and said, "Any questions, ask George Halle. He wrote this."

The gallery floor was a maze. Paths ran between ninety-year-old Louis XV chairs piled on tables, oak credenzas that could have stopped artillery shells, whole families of cast iron lawn deer.

Past two gilded nymphs surprised but not displeased by their nakedness, I spotted a round, flat bronze head of Medusa. She looked like an angry sun, her serpents twisting spokes of light. The social trick she never learned was keeping her snakes inside her skull. I could sympathize.

Then I noticed a busted rocking horse, very much like one I'd had, a dusty doll house, a decorated chest: the toys of the Kavanaughs. In the

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chest were an ancient eagle bank, an armless Barbie, dozens of metal doughboys.

"Madge said you weren't interested in any of this." George smiled at me crouched on the floor with toys in my hands. I'd run into him a couple of times, a nice-looking young guy about my height with curly hair, a mustache and some kind of art history degree. Once he had suggested dinner and I had been pretty abrupt.

"So, you've been asking around about me." I stood up, just remembering to smile. "What did you find out?"

"That you have a lot on your mind." He looked concerned. I wore my shirt open at the collar. He undid the next button. "You should wear it that way." In theory, nothing fazed me. In reality I had made it with a few women, all of whom I knew. And lots of guys, almost none of whom I knew. Not even their names. "Where did you get the shirt? It's great." He undid another button.

"An old clothes store. I had one like it when I was in high school. Hey?" The shirt was open down to my belt.

"The armoire," said a man several aisles over, "is estimated at twelve to sixteen hundred."

"Step into my office," George said. This encounter wouldn't be cloaked in anonymity. It felt like I was taking a head-first plunge.

He had a desk in a cubbyhole behind some tall book cases. He also had a couch. "Sit back," he said. "Leave everything to me."

"Every bedroom in Manhattan big enough for an armoire already has one," a woman remarked.

I heard a soft laugh and realized it was mine.

Two

IN THE VILLAGE on evenings in Spring and in early Fall, dusk and house lights meld, living rooms seem to spill out through their French windows into the twilight streets. Once, on my way to the hospital in that magic hour, I heard a voice quiet but clear, a woodwind, not a violin, say, "Hello, Kevin." And I turned, to see Celia, her hair like a Botticelli angel, asking, "How are you?"

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"Wonderful!" I said and was surprised to realize that was so. She smiled and was past me and gone before I could say any more. I assumed she had been at the hospital visiting her grandfather.

The only time I'd seen her previously was a Sunday evening almost a year before. In those moments when sobriety felt like a kind of living death, there was a number I could call. "Come and visit me, my friend," said Leo Dunn.

He was at the door of his apartment when I arrived. A young lady who was leaving turned back and hugged him. She was still a kid, about seventeen, but tall and already quite a beauty. "My granddaughter Celia," he said. He looked at her with fond disbelief. She had his smile.

Stepping into his apartment I felt momentarily light-headed. When I turned and looked, she was no longer there so I guessed the elevator had come. Leo Dunn looked out the window at the lights of Manhattan. "You know Bob and Maggie." I did. Mr. Dunn's kids were around my age.

"Well, I have an older daughter, Deidre. It was very hard for her having an alcoholic for a father. Worst thing for a child. Her mother, my first wife, and I separated when she was five. After I finally got sober, Deidre was beyond wanting to have anything to do with me. I can count the times that I've seen or spoken to her since. It's the great sorrow of my life. One time was at the death of her mother, another was just after Celia's birth. It was the last time I saw my daughter."

He stopped and turned away. I expected to hear about an awful event, death or a reconciliation gone sour. But when he looked back it was with an enchanted smile. "Then one evening last January, I was here alone when I got a visit from an almost grown grandchild whom I never had a chance to see. She's been by a few times since.

"Our past is always with us. We have to be aware of it without getting engulfed by it. Celia redeems, at least a little, an area of shame and regret. I'm glad that you were able to see her too." Suddenly, he clapped his hands together. "Sunday evening, you've doubtless noticed, is one of the great times for drunks and their self-pity. Especially Irish ones. My wife and Maggie are out visiting. Are you hungry? Let's see what's in the kitchen."

A year later in his hospital room, Leo Dunn was full of plans. He was going home the next day. "I'll be back at work by this time tomorrow. Are you going to come visit me, Kendall?"

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The nurse smiled and said, "of course. You have been one of my MOST interesting patients."

That's when I said, "I just saw your granddaughter downstairs." Mr. Dunn shook his head slightly and I remembered that the first time I had seen her, he had said, "Celia's visits are a personal thing. I'd appreciate your not mentioning this to anyone at all."

Kendall's eyes flickered but he let it pass. I didn't know why this had to be such a secret. MacLunahan too. Mr. Dunn had refused to talk about him.

Kendall was outside as I was leaving. "I know who you were talking about. She comes by in the evening sometimes. He doesn't say anything about it. And that little man you described to me once? The one he didn't want mentioned? He's been around. He's quiet. And he's hard to spot. When you see him, he disappears. Leo Dunn has his devils but he has angels watching over him too." When I said I hoped to see him around, Kendall smiled. He knew we'd all be back.

With Mr. Dunn back uptown, I found myself closing the shop and hurrying through the West Village to George's place. Disco played on car radios, account executives dashed to their co-ops to exchange Armani suits for leathers, ancient Italian ladies trolled home with their shopping bags, couples hugged on corners, opened doors of little restaurants to bursts of Boccherini.

What could have been a ten minute quickie had turned into an affair. George had money, a wonderful apartment, interesting work, reasonably good looks and charm. It seemed as if all I had to offer was an attitude problem and a cloudy past. George was several years younger. But he hadn't spent a big chunk of his life in a black hole. He was an adult and emotionally I was, maybe, fifteen.

One link was his urge to protect and comfort. I offered a prime opportunity. One Sunday morning, he traced the faint scar over my left eye. "They found me face down with no i.d. on an elevator floor," I said. "The door was opening and closing on my head. I had amnesia for days."

George kissed me like that would make it better. Until he did, I hadn't realized how godforsaken and forlorn it sounded. And I hadn't even told him that until enough memory came back for the hospital to contact

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friends and relatives, my only visitor was my Shadow. George never saw my Shadow. And I never mentioned him.

To shake away the mood the two of us got up and went out to a disco. There, Sunday noon was Saturday night and guys danced in clouds of smoke and poppers. It occurred to me that smashing my head on the elevator floor might have been a brutal attempt to give my past the slip.

THREE

IN NOVEMBER, Mr. Dunn had a heart attack and was first rushed to an uptown hospital then transferred to Saint Vincent's and his specialist. Since then, I've became used to friends, loved ones, going in and out of hospitals, each time weaker and more reduced. But then it was all new.

The illness came down to a physical law. Without a heart operation, he would slowly die. But with his kidneys as bad as they were, he couldn't be operated on. And, of course, the bad heart was made worse by uremia and the dialysis he had to undergo. It went around and around in my head. Mr. Dunn had shown me miracles. But not how to work them.

He was far sicker this time. I came in to find him with his hands on the sheets as if he was dead. The face behind the oxygen mask was slack. Except for shallow breathing, he was perfectly still. I made a little noise and after a moment his eyes opened. They were yellow and stood out against the white skin and white hair. They had lost the ability to light and reflect. Now they just charted the progress of the poison which weakened his body and clouded his mind.

"Hi, Mr. Dunn."

For a moment there was no recognition. Then in a voice so thin and so muffled by the mask that I had to stand close to hear it, he said, "Mac. I've had a close call. I thought they got me. Who's that black man outside?"

Though I knew it was stupid, his not recognizing me hurt like a knife cut. "Kendall, your nurse."

"If that's the waiter tell him that I'm ready to go down to dinner. Every high roller in Saratoga is in the hotel tonight. Francis." His hand fluttered to beckon me closer.

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Mr. Dunn thought he was talking to Francis X. MacLunahan. Suddenly, we two weren't alone. I smelled cigars and booze, caught sight of a fedora at the corner of my eye.

"There's money in the drawer," Leo Dunn said. "I saw them take it from me and put it there. You get it now and go out and buy...." His eyes moved as if he was afraid of being overheard. "Scotch. Talk to that Canadian bootlegger we met last night. I'll be entertaining people in here later. Have room service send up ice and ginger ale." I heard MacLunahan snicker.

I tried to laugh like this was a joke. "I think they might catch me sneaking it in. Anyway, you really don't want it."

"You're right, of course." I looked around and it was just the two of us in the room.

When I was leaving, Kendall asked, "Did he recognize you?"

"He seemed kind of confused."

Kendall's smile was as fond as a mother's. "Did he ask you to buy booze and hide it for him? He does that with me too. But you are one of the lucky few he asks for when he's himself."

A day later, Mr. Dunn was totally coherent. "This is a constant siege." His eyes snapped right to mine. "What happens to me, whatever I may say or do, has no bearing on your life. Don't just nod your head. Do you know what I'm talking about, Kevin?"

"Yes, sir."

He nodded, but he didn't smile. "I know you'll be fine. I worry about Damian. My wife does too. We don't seem to be getting through to him. There's no sense of the joy that has to come with the release from addiction. Now, you who are closer to his age..."

"Not that close. Look, there are just too many differences." Mr. Dunn waited, expressionless. "Your granddaughter, maybe, should talk to him." Leo Dunn's expression changed. He grinned.

Leaves fall late in New York. The gutters were still full of them on an evening when George came by the hospital with me. Damian sat outside Mr. Dunn's room. His hair was now neatly cut, his scraggly mustache gone. Instead of shades and a leather jacket he wore glasses and a gray suit. "Doctors are in there." He was bleary-eyed. "I was supposed to see him. But he's sick."

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He sounded to me like a vexed suburbanite complaining about faulty service. And he looked like he'd been getting high. I felt my anger rise. "You changing your image, Damian?" From somewhere in my throat came the voice of my Uncle Mike, the cop.

"For the pre-trial hearings. The lawyer's got my parents convinced I have to go in looking like a fa...." He caught himself. "Like the nerd king. I don't need this. I'm already a pariah."

"What do you do for fun?"

"Fun? Drive. A couple of nights ago, I drove all the way up into Vermont, turned around and came back."

"They suspended your license. It's going to look bad if they bust you."

"I have no one to talk to. No chicks...."

I bored in on him. "So you drive illegally. What else?"

"You mean am I drinking? FUCK YOU I WISH I WAS!" A nurse hushed him. He stormed down the hall to a rest room.

After a moment's silence, George, who hardly ever drank, asked, "Kevin, was Mr. Dunn like that with you?"

"You don't understand this."

"No. But he's just a kid." I shrugged. "He's scared. Of the city, of Mr. Dunn's being sick, of this." He gestured at a gurney rolling past with a patient, a woman, still as death. "He's probably afraid of me. He's certainly afraid of you." He paused. "Sometimes, I am." That made me wince.

Damian came out of the rest room. George said, "Let me go get us some real coffee. Have you eaten, Damian?"

"No. Can I get a Coke? Please." Damian sat down across the visitors' area and avoided looking at me. I realized his red eyes could well have come from squeezing back hard tears.

I got up and walked over. He flinched. "Mr. Dunn told me I was going to have to be braver than I had ever imagined. You too? And he was right. Fortunately, I didn't have to be smart. He was there to be smart for me. My luck. Because any stupid thing you may have done, I did. Plus stuff I hope to Christ you never do. You're getting a lot further on a lot less than I got." No reply. "In other words, the way I just behaved disgusts even me. Okay?"

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I was going to return to my seat when he said, "It's because of me that Kendall called the doctors in." Another long pause. "At first I thought Mr. Dunn was fine. He was smiling and joking. Then, I saw he didn't know who I was and he was talking about a land deal saying all this crazy stuff. I realized he was back in the time when he drank. He said this other name."

"MacLunahan?" I kept my voice casual. "Yeah, Mr. Dunn does that. It's the uremia. And he asked you to get him some booze?"

"No. He kept talking like someone else was in the room. Then I saw him, this little guy with a bottle. I guess I yelled or something because Kendall came in. I mean, Mr. Dunn! Doesn't this ever stop?" Damian sounded like he wanted to cry and I felt kind of like doing the same.

He said, "I'd do anything to have it me who got smashed up instead of that girl that night." Just then, the door of Mr. Dunn's room opened. A couple of residents in scrub suits and a doctor in a sports jacket emerged. They seemed not to notice the young lady in dove gray clothes stepping lightly among them. She smiled at me as she approached. But her attention was directed toward Damian, who stared at the floor.

"Damian," I said. "I'd like you to meet Celia." Moments later she sat on a chair next to him and he looked at her, open mouthed, enraptured. I went over and looked in the room. Mr. Dunn breathed slowly with a mask on his face. He seemed to be smiling.

Kendall beckoned me in. "Leo's oldest daughter, Deidre, was here for the first time yesterday," he whispered. "A hard face. But Leo was at his best. They were alone maybe an hour. She came out looking teary but like a weight was gone. Since then, though, he hasn't been well. I asked Mrs. Dunn, you know, discreetly. There is no granddaughter. Maybe there would have been but Deidre had a miscarriage. I think drinking came into it."

Something familiar lay on the floor. The cork top from an old whiskey bottle. "Then there's MacLunahan," I said. "Everyone seems to agree that he died some years ago."

"And there's you," Kendall sounded a little distant. "You got a brother?" I shook my head, not wanting to hear what I knew was coming. "I saw someone on Greenwich Avenue last night when I was going off duty. Not you, 'cause he had a bruise on his cheek you couldn't hide from me. But close."

"Real close." I looked away, chilled. "Most people don't see him."

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"Most people don't give terminal care. That's what I do, you know, honey. Everyone else here is amazed at how Leo hangs on. But I knew he wouldn't go until he was sure all of you children were taken care of."

As he spoke, I stooped down. The stopper disappeared as I touched it. "At the end I always see their souls," Kendall said. "Most times it's something gray just for a second, maybe a sound like someone sighing. Nothing like what I've seen with him. Nothing at all."

Later, George said, "Damian was aglow. He walked out like he was in a dream. What happened?"

I realized he'd had no hint of Celia's presence. So all I said was, "I got him a date with an angel." He looked puzzled but impressed. And I did feel I had a little to do with it.

Over the next few days what Kendall had told me sunk in. Leo Dunn had his good times. Sometimes when I came in, his face, yellow as a crayoned sun, smiled at me. A couple of times he said my name. Once amid the thunder of garbage being picked up in the street outside, Mr. Dunn roiled in terror. Kendall crooned, "Leo, it's all right, like drums in a parade." Mr. Dunn grew calm. But he never got better.

We cannot let the past control the present, Mr. Dunn had told me. But George was an expert in antiques. The past was his life. One Sunday, he took me to an auction of Mechanical Toys and Automata he had catalogued. New York in early December can be fifty degrees and drizzling with people slightly itchy in those furs and trendy topcoats they've been dying to wear. But inside Masby's up on Park Avenue it was Christmas.

A twelve-foot-high lighted tree was ornamented with cages of brightly painted fluttering finches, Pierrots mutely serenading delighted moons and an eighteen-inch-high Buffalo Bill puffing on a real cigar. All around it, life-sized boys in knickers, girls in lace jackets, high hatted men, ladies in picture hats and fur muffs made gestures of wonder.

Designed as a Paris department store display, that whole tableau was going under the hammer that afternoon. Tchaikovsky played. Grand waltzes swept us onto the viewing floor. George's idea was to distract me in this place where nothing was real.

For a while it worked. We stood at the back of the hall as the auctioneer, a lady with Larchmont lockjaw, began, "From Maison Lambert of Paris, circa 1895, a young woman in a late eighteenth century gown

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of peach and powder blue silk. The face is by Jomeau, the doll maker. A restored Lioret phonograph inside the harpsichord enables her to sing a Mozart aria and a song by Tosti."

"The silk is a replacement. The water marks are clearly post-war," a stiff, pale man remarked to George while staring at me in exactly the same way he had regarded the silk. He seemed not to have as many moving parts as the automata. But he had made me wonder if there was any place for me in this world.

"The bidding," said the auctioneer, "is with the room. We will start at five thousand dollars." A man representing Malcolm Forbes immediately bid that. "Do I hear seventy-five hundred?" Someone on the phone from Switzerland promptly bid more money than I made in a year.

Depressed, I looked back, past the tree, out to the twilight street. And I could hear Mr. Dunn say, "Sunday evening, as you've doubtless noticed, is one of the great times for drunks and their self-pity."

As soon as I remembered that, I knew with utter certainty what was about to happen. I jumped up, telling George to stay. But, of course, he came downtown. Outside the hospital, we found Damian staring up the street, still enchanted. I hoped it would be enough to see him through. Following his gaze, I saw Celia turn once, smile and wave at us all. My own heart tipped over as she faded with the dusk.

Then I noticed Francis X. MacLunahan slip like a wraith into the hospital lobby. I went after him with George and Damian following. He wasn't in the elevator or on the intensive care floor.

Mrs. Dunn was crying in her son's arms. Leo Dunn had a golden glow and a slight smile as he lay still. Kendall whispered to me, "He's still within the room."

And I murmured like a prayer, "Lots of my memories are painful. Stuff I did, the years down the drain. When it gets bad, you're what I remember. You're magic, and the rest of my life is going to seem mean and stupid. But without you it wouldn't be there at all."

"Kevin." Kendall pointed. I turned and MacLunahan stood at the foot of the bed with his head cocked like he heard someone calling him. Already, he was transparent. As I watched he winked out bit by bit. In moments there was just an antique pint bottle of Old Overholt and a battered hat lying on the floor. Like the Cheshire Cat's smile, the fedora melted last.

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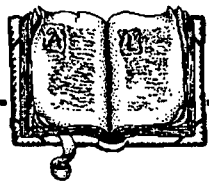

FORGOTTEN TREASURES

MIKE RESNICK

A FEW WEEKS ago I was speaking to a couple of intense young science fiction fans on one of the computer networks. They read just about everything of quality that came out, disdained all the Trekbooks and Wookiebooks and such that litter the bestseller lists, knew the works of Gibson and Willis and Kress and Card and even Resnick inside-out, and were looking forward to attending their first convention.

In the course of our conversation, I mentioned Henry Kuttner. They'd never heard of him.

A little later I referred to something Frederic Brown had written.

They'd never heard of him, either.

They didn't know Eric Frank Russell. Or Catherine Moore, either by her real name or her pen name of C. L. Moore. Never heard of William Tenn. Or A. Merritt. Kinda sorta thought they'd heard of Stanley Weinbaum, but didn't know what he'd done.

And long before our conversation was over, it occurred to me that perhaps what the field needed was a regular column pointing out these forgotten treasures to readers who might love them but had no idea they existed.

The books I write about won't be $50-a-shot collector's items. Or, if they are, I promise they'll all have had paperback editions as well. These are books you can pick up for a dollar in your local paperback resale shop, or in a dealers' room at a science fiction convention, and the odds are you won't find too many better books on the new paperback racks for five or six times the price.

This field has a history. It didn't begin with an actor wearing pointy ears, or even with John Campbell and his disciples. It's been around for a long time, and there's some wonderful stuff out there waiting to be rediscovered. So let's begin...

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Daniel F. Galouye was a disabled World War II vet who could have been much more prolific, but it would have cost him his disability pension. Still, turning out a mere handful of books in the twenty-plus years he lived after the war, he managed to write one genuine classic and a couple of other near-misses.

The classic is *Dark Universe*, which lost the 1962 Hugo to Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* by the narrowest of margins. It was a paperback original, and has been reprinted in both paperback and hardcover.

Galouye postulates a future in which a number of people went underground — *'way* underground — when atomic war looked inevitable. Except that the war didn't occur, and this society has been existing in total darkness, far beneath the ground, for generations.

How would such a society develop? What kind of culture would they form? How would knowledge pass from one generation to another?

And how would they react to a silent sound that hurts the eyes (i.e., light?)

Galouye has couched a remarkable bit of speculation in a fast-moving action-adventure framework, far superior to most similar exercises that are available today.

Henry Kuttner was, with his wife C. L. Moore, the exemplar of the smooth, polished, professional writer. He was so prolific that he needed not just one pseudonym, but more than half a dozen. Two of them — Lewis Padgett and Lawrence O'Donnell — actually were more popular than Kuttner himself in some 1940s readers' polls. Kuttner was one of the few writers in the history of this field — Frederic Brown, Robert Sheckley, William Tenn, Ron Goulart, Esther Friesner, John Sladek, George Alec Effinger and myself constitute the bulk of the others — who was able to sell humor in some quantity. And most readers will argue that his Gallagher stories, collected as *Robots Have No Tails*, are his funniest.

The stories are not that different from each other, except for the "gimmick"...and as humorous gimmick stories, they represent a type that John Campbell never tired of running, provided they were well-written (and if Kuttner ever wrote a sloppy story after 1940, I think it must have escaped everyone's notice.)

Gallagher is an inventor. He is also a drunk. He is, furthermore, a

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genius — but only when he's drunk. And in each story, he sobers up, finds some incredibly complex machine that he can't recall inventing, and has to figure out what it does — whether it can save the world from nuclear holocaust, or whether it's simply a machine that can open a beer can in 73 distinct steps.

(Warning: the hardcover lists the author as Lewis Padgett, the paperback as Henry Kuttner.)

Lots of fun — and a fine introduction to this sort of thing.

I'm one of the few people who think Kuttner's wife, the late C. L. Moore, was an even better writer before she started collaborating with him. She became a much more polished stylist thereafter, but Kuttner, in truth, was never known for the originality of his ideas, and with a few exceptions such as the classic novella, "Vintage Season" (reprinted as part of a Tor Double a few years ago — buy it if you can find it), I prefer her earlier work.

In fact, I have said on many occasions that whenever my sense of wonder needs a shot of adrenaline, I picked up one of Moore's Northwest Smith stories and I'm fine thirty minutes later.

Northwest Smith is a space opera hero, whose adventures tend toward the fantastic and the truly erotic (no, don't look for explicit sex, not in stories that appeared in the 1930s). Moore can weave a web of words that will transport you to the same exotic lands that Smith visits, and make you — depending on the land — either reluctant to return home or desperate to get back to safe surroundings.

The most famous is the oft-reprinted "Shambleau," but there are many others, each equally mesmerizing. The stories were collected in paperback as *Northwest Smith*, and are still available from specialty publisher Don Grant as *Scarlet Dream*, a beautiful (but expensive) hardcover with a number of color plates.

Frederic Brown was the master of the vignette, the 500-word short-short story that looks so easy until you try to write it. Brown sold well over 50 of them, plus dozens of stories of more normal length.

But to me, his masterpiece — maybe it's just because I grew up in science fiction fandom — is the novel, *What Mad Universe?*, which probably qualifies as the first recursive science fiction novel (i.e., a novel *about* science fiction).

I'm letting one of the plot kittens out of the bag, but the book is

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such a delight that it'll do no serious harm if I tell you that it concerns a pulp science fiction editor who finds himself in a rip-roaring alien-plagued super-hero naked-heroine universe that exists in the mind of one of his goshwowboyoboy teen-aged readers. Brown takes every tired old cliché of science fiction — all of which appeal to the typical teenager — and forms them into a wonderfully comic adventure.

This is another one that had a few paperback editions, became acknowledged as a classic, and then came out in a limited, very expensive, collector's hardcover. Hunt up the paperback — it's not that rare.

Eric Frank Russell is perhaps best-known in science fiction history as the man who caused John Campbell to create *Unknown Worlds* — perhaps the finest fantasy magazine ever published — when his novel, *Sinister Barrier*, didn't fit *Astounding's* format but was too good to reject.

Russell, an Englishman with a sly sense of humor, went on to write *Dreadful Sanctuary*, the Jay Score stories, and the early Hugo winner "Alamagoosa."

But to me, his best novel — and his great lost career opportunity — is *Wasp*, which has seen numerous paperback editions, most recently the complete, restored text edition from del Rey.

A man is called to his superior's office during a war with an alien race. The superior shows him a report of a car with four strong, competent, 200-pound men, going over a cliff, killing all the occupants. Why? Because of a one-ounce wasp that took the driver's attention off the road.

His job is to be set down on the aliens' home world and become a wasp, a tiny irritant that takes up an inordinate amount of the aliens' military attention.

It's a brilliant bit of espionage/thriller fiction. I believed the day I read it — and I believe to this day — that if Russell had set it in Nazi Germany during World War II, he'd have written a worldwide bestseller and ranked as Eric Ambler's only serious rival until Robert Ludlum and Ken Follett came along decades later. Instead it was a science fiction novel, with typical science fiction sales figures — the world's loss, and our gain.

The late James Blish, writing as William Atheling, Jr., once proved — to *his* satisfaction, at least — that A. Merritt was the lowest kind of hack, and that of all Merritt's

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fantasies, *The Ship of Ishtar* was by far the worst.

Perhaps if he'd talked to some of Merritt's legion of readers, he might have figured out why Merritt will keep coming back into print long after just about everything Blish wrote is forgotten.

What Merritt wrote were Romances. Not the small-r romance novels of Harlequin and Silhouette, but the Capital-R Romances that are cut from the same cloth as the works of H. Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs. Yes, they abound in purple prose. No, no one was ever meant to take them seriously. Yes, they will transport you to worlds that you will wish existed. No, the characters are not three-dimensional; in fact, most of them are lucky to possess two dimensions. Yes, they are filled with Romance and Adventure and Exoticism and a Sense of Wonder — and Blish to the contrary, the best of them is *The Ship of Ishtar*, which has seen half a dozen paperback and trade paperback editions and shouldn't be too hard to find.

In California, there is a house built entirely of garbage — and yet, in its final form it is considered a work of art.

I want to tell you about a book like that.

Movie buffs: Remember the Man With No Name? The Fat Man?

Comic fans: Do you know who The Big Red Cheese is?

Pulp fans: Remember the dapper little Lawyer with the sword cane?

Mystery fans: You know the Fat Man (see above)...but how about The Other Fat Man? Or the Consulting Detective?

Well, all these icons exist in one book — *Autumn Angels*, by Arthur Byron Cover, which I consider the most brilliant debut novel of the 1970s. Cover takes the icons of movies, comics, pulp magazines, and other popular entertainments, icons aimed at the Lowest Common Denominator, puts them together, and comes up with a true work of art as three of his characters go on a quest to end boredom in a world of perfect men with godlike powers.

I realize that this book appeared in 1975. To me, that's barely the day before yesterday. But demographics say that if you are reading this magazine, the odds are better than 50-50 that *Autumn Angels* has been out of print since before you were 10 years old.

Which, I suppose, is why I'm writing this column in the first place.

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Kent Patterson was one of the most promising new writers of the 1990s when he passed away suddenly in March of 1995. This is the last story he wrote for us.

"This story," he said in an accompanying letter, "presents my Grand Unification Theory of the universe, proving the mysteries of romance, physics, country western music, and the contrary nature of cats are all local manifestations of the same universal force."

That Cruel Pauli Exclusion

By Kent Patterson

AT THE PRECISE INSTANT Roy Strahling stepped up to the swinging doors of the Cowboy Galileo Country Western Physicist's Bar and Grill, he heard the back door slam. Across the crowded room, he could see the door marked "Exit." For a second, he imagined he had glimpsed the flicker of a blue skirt vanishing as the door closed, but he knew that was only dreaming. All he had really seen was the door. That's all he ever would see no matter how many times he looked.

You can't break the laws of physics.

Roy choked down the lump in his throat. Though he'd missed her a thousand times already, the pain was always fresh. A thousand times he'd tried to forget her, drowning the pain of her absence with liquor, travel, other women, dangerous and expensive hobbies like rocket racing and helicopter hockey. The billionaire playboy with a broken heart, the tabloids called him.

They were wrong. His heart wasn't broken, just missing.

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Overhead, a huge neon cowboy sputtered, drawing myriads of insects, other poor worshippers of an unobtainable beauty, to their doom. The cowboy's lariat made an infinity sign reaching thirty meters into the night sky. The Cowboy Galileo Bar, roughest place in the world for either cowboys or physicists. If he couldn't find what he needed here, he'd never find it. This was where the trail ended.

Letting the swinging doors flap behind him, Roy stepped into the bar. A map of Texas outlined in red hung on the far wall. Blue neon showed two six shooters pointing muzzle to muzzle, the unofficial logo of the gigantic complex called the Superconducting Super Collider which lay just at the edge of town. Congress had started and canceled the project many times, but now it was finished at last. When they unthinkingly located the SSC in Texas, they had merged two cultures, both, in their own way, the last holdout of American macho, the Texas cowboy and the particle physicist.

Hard-eyed men and women of many races clustered around tables set up for chess and go. Some played, some offered advice, or argued in a dozen languages that filled the room with white noise. Others stood in silence, watching, their eyes cool, their faces without expression. The air reeked with the scent of capuccino and the smoke of foreign cigarettes. Pictures of scientists ranging from paintings of Pythagoras, Galileo, and Newton to the famous photo of Einstein, with his deep eyes and flaring white hair, covered the walls. A Foucault Pendulum shaped like a coffin and scythe hung from the ceiling, marking the course of the world turning beneath it.

"Check your thumbs, camper?" a woman said. She looked about twenty-five, and wore a short black skirt, low cut blouse, and tiny gold earrings with a plus sign on the left, a minus on the right. "House rules, you know." She pointed to a sign on the wall: "All Customers Must Check Thumb Tops At The Door. This Means You."

Roy held out his hands. She glanced at his nails, checking for the tiny monitors of thumb top computers.

"You're packing two. Expecting trouble?" she said as she slipped tight blue rubbers over each thumb. Her voice, at first curt, suddenly became warm, flirtatious.

"One's for backup."

"Well, we run a quiet place. You need some quick calculations, there's an abacus at the bar. Heavy duty number crunching, there's plenty

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of room outside." More curtness. Maybe she hadn't intended the flirty stuff.

"Actually, I'm looking for a woman."

"That's me, at least the last time anyone noticed." She swiveled her hips and grinned, flirting again.

"No, I don't mean that way."

"Which way, then?"

"Look, please help me. If you could take a message, I really need to communicate with her. She left just as I came in."

"Communicate? Take a message? Camper, you sure know the language to win a lady's heart. So what's this ideal particle of femininity look like, anyway?" Even more curt. Her inconsistency unnerved Roy. He found himself stuttering.

"I know she's wearing blue."

"That's all you know? Aren't you the observant one, though."

"No, you don't understand. I've never actually seen her. I only know she's wearing blue because that's the color I'm deliberately not wearing."

"Uh oh. You arrive, she's gone. She wears blue because you're not. Don't try to snow me, camper. You've got a Pauli problem."

"No, I don't have a Pauli problem, I just ..."

"Don't BS me. I'm not your average singing physicist barmaid, you know. I'm post-doc from Cal Tech. Just working here to pay off my student loans. You and your girl friend are a Pauli pair."

"You act like that's a crime."

"No worse law breaker than a physical law breaker. I mean, Pauli's exclusion principle keeps any two particles of the same spin orientation from occupying the same energy orbit at the same time. Good idea, otherwise all the particles would drop to the lowest energy state and the entire universe would collapse to an infinitely small hot point in space time. Sounds painful to me."

"So being a Pauli makes me a leper?"

"It makes you bad news, and I got trouble of my own. Take some advice." She leaned forward, flashing very nice cleavage, letting her voice go warm and sexy. "Forget her. You're no hunk, but you got nice eyes. There's plenty of single women here, and the worst of them will give you less grief than a Pauli."

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"I can never forget her."

"You've never met her."

"But wherever I am, she's not. I always know exactly where she isn't. I'm on, she's off. I step left, she steps right. I can't make a move without moving her. If I look at a tree, a house, a statue, a pretty woman, she's always not there. Always. No matter where I look, there's always a place where she isn't. She's the only one in the world who always is not there. How can I forget her?"

"Oh, Lord, you do have it bad. Well, dry your eyes. I tried. Ciao, camper. I've got other customers." Very curt, even snappy. Roy couldn't figure her out.

Roy made his way through the crowd past a wire rack of schlocky cowboy physicist souvenirs. Color-the-quark books. Bits of licorice called "Cosmic Strings." Rubber cows that said "muon" when squeezed. Bumper stickers saying "I Brake for Inelastic Collisions" and "I [heart] Naked Charm."

The bar was solid black, so black that when Roy looked at it, it seemed to pull him down, down, like falling into a hole in space.

"Snap out of it, camper. Stare into there too long you'll become recursively bemused, then it's straight off to the funny farm. I lose a lot of customers that way."

Roy started, then saw a bald man in a bartender's apron kneeling on the floor in front of a small blue box. Carefully, the man spooned cat food into a dish marked "Schrödinger." Then he pulled an old gray sack over his head. Fumbling blindly, he found a small flap at the side of the box, then pushed the dish inside, closing the flap. Taking off the sack, he stowed it under the bar and stood up.

"Name your poison," he said.

"What an odd way to feed a cat."

"Might not be a cat. He might be dead."

"Is he dead?"

"Neither dead nor alive until I see into the box. So I never look. Just in case."

"Oh." Roy examined the list of drinks on the blackboard over the bar. Neutron bombs. Tachyon cocktails. The usual beers and wines, along with a lot of ethnic coffees with unpronounceable names. Roy ordered

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something from Ethiopia. When it arrived, he slipped the bartender a fiver.

"Keep the change."

"Thanks." His expression didn't soften.

"What I'm looking for is a woman in blue. She's ..."

"She's a Pauli. I saw you hassling Marie at the door."

"Marie?"

"Marie Curie Gallagher, our door keeper and lead canary. She gave you some damned good advice. Take it."

"How can I possibly forget the love of my life?"

"Easy. She ain't here. You bet I forget my old lady when she's not here."

"Look, I need help," said Roy, dropping his voice, and knowing he was taking a chance. "I hear there's a guy who knows ways around the Pauli exclusion principle. I have a hundred for anyone who can introduce me to the Moby Man."

"Hell, camper. Can't you read?" He pointed to a sign over the bar. "All Quantum Principles Strictly Enforced." Then he turned back to Roy. "If I weren't such a soft-hearted wuss, I'd run you in. This here's a decent, physical law abiding bar. Ain't nobody calling himself the Moby Man here, you can bet on it. Now drink your damned coffee and shut up."

Roy sipped his coffee, black stuff which tasted like glue with too much sugar. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the bartender give a nod to the bouncer, who sauntered over, pulled up his belt, then sat on the stool next to Roy. His face looked like an airless asteroid ten milliseconds after a major meteor bombardment. Roy turned away.

On a low stage at the end of the bar, a band, Big Al and the Relative Rangers, set up their instruments. The lead guitar had frizzy white hair, cowboy boots, and a steel belt buckle that said "Physicists Bang Bigger."

Then, apparently from out of the wall, Marie Curie stepped out, or rather slinked out. This time she wore a long gray gown which sparkled in the light and outlined every curve.

The room went quiet. The Relative Rangers hit a country western blues beat, and Marie's smoky voice sliced through the white noise like a neutrino through a lead vest.

"Can't help loving that Heisenburg man,

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Though he hurts me more than I can stand.
He's just too mean to me,
Keeps me in Uncertainty."

Slowly, light flickering around the curves of her breasts, belly and hips, she minced around the stage. In the back, some one yelled "Eureka!"

"He hurts me, I'll tell you that,
If I know how fast he's going,
I don't know where he's at.
I can't stand by my man,
'Cause he's not here at hand,
My Heisenburg man."

EXCEPT FOR THE chess players, who didn't move, everyone else went wild, whistling and stomping, but Roy stayed silent, letting the last notes echo in his mind, astounded at the pain he'd felt. No actor could fake that kind of hurt. This woman wasn't just singing a song; she was living it. She had to be a Heisenburg, a victim of the Uncertainty Principle. Of course. That would explain her sudden swings in mood. How could you flirt if you could never be sure your real lover wasn't there?

Or maybe he was wrong. He'd met an actress once who could cry on cue, just like turning on a light.

One way to find out. She was taking requests now, and Roy forced himself through the crowd to the stage, waving a ten dollar bill in his hand.

She bent over, taking the bill and stuffing it into her cleavage.

"So what's it going to be, camper?"

"The Pauli Exclusion."

She looked directly into his eyes. "I got a million cheating songs. Wouldn't you rather have 'Your Cheating Quark'?"

"No. Sing Pauli."

She shrugged, sending light flickering across her dress and the money deeper down. The guitar hit a slow walking rhythm.

"Oh, Babe, it ain't no illusion," she sang. Up close now, Roy watched her face, her eyes, even the way her throat muscles moved. Let her grin, flirt, slink, shake her bottom anyway she pleased, here was a broken-hearted woman.

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"Ah, we don't stand a chance,
In that orbital dance,
When you're out and I'm in,
With an opposite spin.
Oh, Babe, it ain't no illusion,
That cruel Pauli Exclusion
Is ruling out my love for you."

Satisfied now, Roy drifted back into the crowd, trying to lose the bouncer who drifted after him. At last the set ended, and Marie and the Relativity Rangers vanished backstage. Roy had already scoped out the "Employees Only" door that must go to the back rooms. Now to get rid of Mr. Bouncer.

"Sir. Oh, sir," Roy said.

"Yeah?"

"I just saw a guy in a dark suit peeking into your cat box. He's killing your cat."

"What!" The man's face turned a deeper shade of red. "I'll kill *him*! The boss loves that cat. If there is a cat."

He lumbered off, cursing and waving his fists. Roy slipped through the door.

He saw a long hallway, with doors every few feet. He walked along, listening. Loud male laughter from one door, doubtless some of the Rangers. Then Roy saw a door marked with a faded gold star. Roy opened the door, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him.

"Hey! You ever heard of knocking?" Seated at a makeup table equipped with a mirror lined with lights, Marie turned in her chair to face him. She wore only panties and a wispy white lace bra. Picking up a pair of scissors, she held them like a knife. "Don't try anything cute, camper."

"I'm harmless." Roy raised his hands. "I just need to talk to you."

"We've talked already."

"Look. Let's stop pretending, shall we? I'm a Pauli, but you got a Heisenburg problem. So don't do the innocent act for me. We're two of a kind. You know what it's like, trapped forever in a hopeless affair by an unfeeling, unfair quantum principle. Help me. Then perhaps I can help you."

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Marie laid the scissors back on the table, stood up and pulled a long dress, blue, with lots of sequins, over her head. "Here," she said, turning her back. "Zip me up." Roy did so, trying to ignore the long smooth curve of her back and rump, the scent of her perfume.

"Nothing can help me, ever," she said, her voice flat, emotionless.

"Don't say that. There must be a way around the Heisenburg Principle. Have you ever heard of the Moby Man?"

"Yeah, I've heard. He can't help me."

"How do you know?"

She blushed, hung her head, and mumbled something that sounded like he's my auntie. Auntie Moby Man? That made no sense at all.

Roy heard heavy footsteps in the hallway outside. "Then let him help me! How can I find him?"

She looked up. Her face looked like a steel mask, unreadable. "The Moby Man's weird, so bad he got bounced out of Berkeley. You know that says a lot."

"I have money. I can pay you." He waved his blue-coated computerized thumb. "Five thousand? Ten? Name your price."

Suddenly the door burst open and a huge hand gripped Roy's elbow. The bouncer.

"Gotcha, you little weasel," he said. "He bothering you, Ms. Gallagher?"

"No, he's not bothering me."

"Well, he's bugging the shit out of me. Move it, guy, or your butt's got a date with my foot." He dragged Roy backwards as easily as a child does a doll, but even as he was pulled through the door, Roy heard Marie whisper two words.

"Follow Schrödinger."

Seconds later, Roy sailed through the Exit door and smacked into the street. The street smacked back equally and oppositely.

Roy lay and moaned. Above him, a few dim stars shone through the haze of the city lights. Sharp stones in the pavement pricked his neck and scalp. The street smelled of car exhaust, stale beer, and rotting garbage.

Follow Schrödinger, she'd said. And how was he to follow a long-dead German theoretician?

No, of course, she must mean Schrödinger the cat. Roy sat up to look

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around but stopped himself just in time. Schrödinger was only a potential cat. The slightest glimpse at any place he might be would collapse the probability wave, and either Schrödinger would be there, or he would not be. A fifty-fifty chance at best. No, how could he know what the probabilities were? And if he looked, and there was no Schrödinger, he was not likely to get such a chance again. He'd be a Pauli forever.

There had to be a better way. He ripped the blue rubbers off his thumbs and booted up both computers. Surely, in all those gigabytes of storage, there had to be something about cats.

Yes. Cat movements could be described as a prime example of chaotic behavior. Chaotic, but not entirely random, since a cat took a path between certain attractors and repellors. Attractors included small rodents, bugs, birds, sentimental old ladies, the sound of can openers, and people allergic to cats. Repellors were larger cats, dogs, and people calling "here, kitty, kitty." The exact weight given each factor depended upon the cat, but since Schrödinger had served so many years as a theoretical example, Roy could assume his behavior would be close to the norm. Therefore, he could calculate sort of a "cat corridor," a path where if a cat existed, he was likely to be.

The computer screen went blank for a second, then flashed a red arrow to the left. Roy didn't look. He couldn't risk collapsing the probability wave that was all that existed of Schrödinger. Still, walking through city streets at night blindfolded had no appeal. He compromised on looking no lower than eye level. Cats could climb, but they couldn't fly, so the risk was slight.

Or so he thought. He stumbled along, cracking his shins on something metal (a fire hydrant?), then tripping over a garbage can, coming up with an apple peel dangling from his belt and the contents of a disposable diaper smearing one knee. Ignoring both the sore shin and the penetrating odor, Roy shuffled along, trying to avoid obstacles by feeling ahead with one foot.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Christ, if it started to rain, the cat corridor would shrink to nothing. He had to move. Regardless of the danger, he started to run, smashing into a parking meter, staggering forward, then falling off a curb with a shock of pain in his back and knee.

A cool raindrop splatted against his forehead, then another and

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another. Now he ran desperately, looking at nothing but the red arrow on his thumb nail, hot knives of pain shooting through his knee, a humming in his ears becoming louder and louder. Then something caught his foot and he fell forward, slamming his head and dropping as if he'd been shot.

The cool rain woke him up. A loud humming in his ears hurt his head. A concussion, he thought. But gradually his head cleared and he realized the humming came from outside, not inside.

He lay on a flight of steps in front of a wooden door. He'd tripped on the bottom step, then fell forward, hitting his head but good. Gingerly, he felt the bump and wiped away a trickle of blood.

The rain hissed on the black pavement, falling hard as only Texas rain can. No cat, not even a theoretical cat, would brave that rain. He'd lost Schrödinger, he'd lost himself, and he'd lost the one true love of his life. He was just a bum, stinking of garbage, on some stranger's doorstep in the rain.

Then he glanced at his thumbnail. The red arrow pointed straight at the door.

Roy stood up and brushed himself off as well as he could. He had no idea where he was, but he could see the huge mound of the SSC just a block away, so he must be in Oldtown, that section of the original city condemned when the collider had been built. Yes. The buildings looked deserted, peeled paint, broken windows staring at nothing. No street lights, people, or traffic.

The loud humming came from behind the door in front of him. Timidly, Roy knocked.

Nothing, so he knocked louder. Still nothing, so he kicked the door.

It swung open. Now the humming was deafening. The door opened into a long dark hallway. At the other end, another door, with a streak of light under it. Slowly, Roy walked down the hall, hardly daring to breathe.

The door opened. Roy blinked, blinded by the light. As his eyes adjusted, he could see into a huge room, obviously a physics lab, with long shelves holding electrical equipment along each wall. Directly in front of him a metal table stretched for at least ten meters, and above that, apparently suspended in space, a blue light crackled and hissed like lightning, forming a gigantic Möbius strip in midair.

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Abruptly, the humming stopped. The Möbius strip faded to nothing.

"Well, you found me at last," a woman's voice said.

Roy turned. "Marie! What are you doing here?"

"Running a highly illegal Möbius converter, of course," she said. She flipped a few switches on the control panel in front of her, then looked at Roy. She wore a shapeless flannel shirt and faded blue jeans, with the positive and minus sign earrings. "Well, unless you're the cops, or especially if you're the cops, you're looking for the Moby Man. That's me."

"You're the Moby Man? I was looking for...."

"A man? You male chauvinists are all alike."

"Look, Marie. You're jerking me around. I nearly killed myself tracking a damned low probability cat all over this city."

"Yes. You look like something a low probability cat dragged in." She threw back her head and laughed.

Roy stared, then scowled. He'd been suckered. How could anyone sing so beautifully, act through all the finest human emotions, then turn out to be so cruel? He looked closer. Something was not right. Yes, the same face, same eyes, the same smoky voice, yet something rang false.

Earrings! Marie wore the plus sign on the left, the minus on the right; this woman directly opposite. Same person, different signs. Marie hadn't said "auntie" but "anti." Elementary particle physics claimed every particle had its opposite anti-particle, identical in every way except for charge.

"You're poor Marie's evil twin." Roy shuddered. "No wonder she wouldn't come with me. One touch of you, and you'd both vanish in a shock wave that would level Texas."

"Big deal. Texas couldn't get more level. Now, leveling Colorado, that would be a feat."

"You know what I mean."

"So now that you know who I am, what do you want? Let's get on with it. It's late, and I have a lot of crime on my hands."

"I want to marry my Pauli."

"Violate the exclusion principle? That's heavy, man. Contracts the universe to a point."

"I'm surprised you care."

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"Well, it would play hob with property values, for starters. And just when I'm really getting into slum lording."

"I'll pay you very well."

"Let me think a bit."

She sat on a swivel chair, put her feet on her control console, closed her eyes, and started to hum "Oh, Babe, it ain't no illusion."

Roy waited nervously. He thought he heard a cat meow, but wasn't sure.

"There might be a way," she said. "I could convert you and your Pauli mate to boson wave packets, rather than Fermion particles. Of course that entails first ripping your body into a hot plasma, then recording that information, then converting you both into pure energy wave forms. Very interesting, that. You'd eventually wind up as pure light. Time would stop for you, which means everything would be over in an instant, or you'd have eternity, I'm not sure. Anyway, you'd have to give up your bodies, which could be a hardship, affection-wise."

For a long time, Roy thought. Then he released his breath in a long sigh. "There's no other way?"

"Not without collapsing the universe."

This time Roy waited even longer and sighed even more deeply. He wished he could contact his Pauli partner, but that wasn't possible. Yet he could feel her absence everywhere, her voice not whispering in his ear, her soft fingers not touching his.

"Then do what you must. Ours has always been a spiritual union."

"Not my idea of a red-hot affair, but it must have advantages. Don't need condoms, for one."

She ran a credit check through his thumb top and Roy gave her an access code which would allow her to collect her bribe. Then she told him to take off his clothes and lie on top of the steel table.

"You want me naked?" he said.

"Well, you wouldn't want to become a probability wave permeating the universe in that get up, would you? You look like a punk rock CPA."

Feeling shy, Roy stripped and climbed on top of the table. The metal felt as cold and smooth as steel, which somehow surprised him, though logically it shouldn't.

"Oh, incidentally," anti-Marie said. "This is going to yield a big burst

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of energy. Since it won't matter to you, I suppose you don't mind if I run you through Texas Power and Light? I'll pick up fifteen cents a kilowatt."

Before he could answer, the humming began again, louder and louder until the steel table vibrated like a drum head. Lightning crackled, turning finally into a flickering Möbius strip suspended in air a meter over his head. A faint blue glow grew around Roy's body, an electric aura which became brighter and brighter, a force pulling him up, up, into the Möbius strip, tugging at his head and feet, stretching until his bones cracked, invading every bit of muscle fiber, every drop of blood, separating molecule from molecule, atom from atom. Finally even the binding glue which holds matter together transmuted to energy.

When he came to himself Roy could feel his toes tingling in time with his scalp, as if they were simultaneously three thousand miles away and right next to each other, toes tingling on his head, or in his head, scalp tingling at the end of his feet, his body a shimmering mass unsubstantial as sunlight glittering on the ripples of a fast moving brook, feeling not pain but an urge beyond all logic to undulate in a long slow dance in which his head and his toes changed places sixty times a second.

Alternating is murder at first, then the pain fades, and Roy grows to love the sensuality of it, the smooth rise, up, up, then at the very climax the power swelling at maximum then down, down, and down to satiation in the trough in the perfect sine wave.

Now Roy surges through the power grid of the nation, he and his Pauli lover together at last, wave front to wave front, high to high, low to low, in perfect phase, their love consummated in an instant lasting all eternity, two Hertz rates beating as one, spinning the armatures of a million industrial motors, heating the wide open ranges of a million kitchens, and finally flowing into the white hot plasma of the neon sign of the Cowboy Galileo, turning to pure light in the loops of the lariat waving the sign of infinity toward the endless prairies of the universe.

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We published the first of Sheila Finch's Lingster tales in our September 1996 issue. The second became our December cover story. "A Flight of Words" is the third in this loosely tied series of stories about a Guild of Xenolinguists and the troubles they encounter.

A Flight of Words

By Sheila Finch

THE PRISONER'S BIRDLIKE warbling reached Corry Padmasam's ears as she turned the corner at the top of the narrow stairs. The alpha sequence she'd started this morning in preparation for interface kicked in, heightening the lingster's senses till she was aware of the separate grains of packed earth in the wall and subtle movements of the stale air, as well as minute variations in the alien's pitch and tone.

The Tlokee guard padding on five of its six legs beside her gestured impatiently with one black-furred leg. High Mother had ordered this interview with the prisoner, and in the guard's view, High Mother was god. With the sixth leg, it held a dim lightstalk — mostly for her benefit, Tlokee eyes being adapted to underground darkness. She thought of the warning from the ferry captain who'd brought her here: High Mother had an unpredictable temper and a taste for violence.

The stairs led down from the maze-like tunnels of the warren, ominously cold and dark in contrast to the warmth and luxury of High

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Mother's quarters. She rubbed briskly at her arms. New Tlok was a world of sharp contrasts: scorching days and icy nights, a planet with an atmosphere as thin at its surface as Earth's was high in its mountains. She'd been a lingster for a long time and she'd served the Guild of Xenolinguists with dozens of aliens on worlds all over the Orion Arm, and she was no longer excited by the idea of meeting a new one. Lingstering was a young person's trade. Time to retire.

High Mother Q'taka M'ung Zy, conqueror of this planet she'd renamed New Tlok, had explained this morning that she needed a lingster to forge an interface between the language of the rulers and that of the native race displaced by the recent immigration of the Tlokee. "We are not an uncivilized people, dear lingster Corry," High Mother had said, the dull gold fur of the head ruff that marked a queen of her species unfolding and folding. The Tlokee resembled a child's favorite stuffed animal, but lingsters knew better than to judge by appearances. "We wish to bring these poor refugees into Our caring embrace." Corry must've looked skeptical at that, for High Mother added, "And it would be pleasant to count the wealth We have here, the beasts and the harvest."

William of Normandy had managed to get his Doomsday Book without benefit of a lingster, Corry thought as her escort fumbled with a wooden door at the bottom of the stairs. She spent most of her off-duty hours studying Terran history, a hobby that sometimes allowed her insight into the pronouncements of the Guild but only occasionally helped in the field. Earth seemed to have worked its way through a rather minor series of choices, as far as societies along the Arm were concerned.

The door swung open and she stepped into the cell. The guard set the lightstalk in a niche on the wall.

The prisoner — disinherited original inhabitant of the planet — was vaguely humanoid, with gangly legs, a small head and large eyes, luminous in the guard's dim lightstalk. Where a bird would've had wings, the creature sprouted thin, knobby arms with an extra joint, and it quivered with a fear so potent Corry could smell it: a sweetly acid odor like urine and sour sweat. Guild lingsters often encountered reluctance in subjects — a lingster's ability to create interface was often perceived as mystical, perhaps even magical — but rarely fear like this. For a moment, she felt apprehensive.

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As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she realized the alien did have wings; the dull reddish-brown feathers bedraggled and broken-looking, they seemed hardly capable of lifting a hollow-boned bird let alone this skinny starveling.

Her mother had run a small inn in the foothills of the Himalayas. One day, in her twelfth year, an itinerant peddlar had stopped at the inn. She remembered a grubby, pinched-face man with a dozen ramshackle bamboo cages piled on a rickety cart. Song birds for sale, smuggled to Earth from worlds far away, most of them pining for skies they'd never see again, some of them obviously ill. She'd stood in the cobblestoned courtyard, drawn by the proud, undefeated gaze of a bird the size of a Terran eagle. Its feathers were red as blood, and it balanced awkwardly on one leg because the other had been mangled in the trap that caught it....

She shook the memory away.

Now she felt the soft prick of the link opening in her brain as the computer, several floors above her in the warren, prepared to receive the images her eyes were seeing.

"This piece of excrement will give no trouble!" the Tlokee guard said, aiming a kick in the prisoner's direction.

"Take the manacles off."

The guard growled, but did as it was told. The manacles fell with a dull clang to the packed earth floor. One good thing to be said about a hive-mind race like the Tlokee, she thought, all it took was a strong personality to boss them around.

"And you leave now."

The Tlokee displayed a jaw full of sharp teeth, but she stood her ground. She waited till it had left the cell, then took a step forward.

The bird alien jerked back in alarm from her approach, the wrists it had been studying when the manacles were removed still held up to its eyes. It had never seen a human before, and probably found her as odd-looking as she found it.

She shut her eyes tightly for a second, dispelling the lingering dizziness caused by hyper-awareness, then opened them again and studied the alien. She would've guessed the creature was a non-sentient, but then High Mother's desire to communicate with it and its fellows rather than herd them would've made no sense.

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There was no furniture in the cell other than a pile of thin straw bedding, and an exposed section of a tree's deep root that served as a footstool. Upstairs, the AI was prepared to receive data, its detail enhanced by the alpha sequence of drugs she'd already taken. It would catalog and process samples, discover the grammatical underpinnings of this language and feed the information back to her in a loop growing ever more complex. And when she'd completed her task, it would set up a program for High Mother to use.

She indicated with gesture and pantomime that the alien should be comfortable on the straw. The creature settled down in a misshapen hump of bony limbs and bedraggled, dirty feathers, gazing at her with a myopic, wistful expression. Unfastening the field-pack she wore on her belt, she sat on the thick root, then laid the pack's contents out on the floor between her feet and studied it.

Small plastiglass vials of the lingster's stock in trade — the alpha sequence: neurotransmitters, and the beta sequence: state alterers — gleamed in the dull light. The vials were carefully labeled, but her hands knew them by their distinctive, failsafe shapes. A young lingster fresh from Earth had told her there was talk now of subcutaneous pumps and artificial glands; she was glad she was too old to be required to use them.

She glanced at the alien crouched trembling on the straw across from her and felt sympathy; the process wouldn't hurt, but the alien didn't know that. The job could take several hours or several days, depending on the amount of cooperation she received from the alien and the degree of uniqueness of its language.

Her hand played over the beta sequence vials as she considered the choices. While it was not a good idea to take risks, any experienced lingster knew how to find shortcuts. She opened a narrow vial and allowed two drops of thin, briny liquid to drip onto her tongue.

Four hours later, she'd learned the planet's true name was Xsi and that its people were the Inxsienga — before High Mother renamed it New Tlok in honor of her own homeworld. And unlike the Tlokee with only one true personality among them, High Mother herself, these people had individual names. This one was male and he was called Vxwi.

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With luck, she wouldn't be summoned to High Mother's chambers to deliver a progress report. She wanted to look over what High Mother's AI had done with her preliminary work.

She sat and pulled out the oddly designed keyboard that suited High Mother but made her own ten fingers seem fat and clumsy. Probably a Venatixi design; Venatixi technology was the best in the Arm. The thought made her smile. She'd acquired a lot of useless information in her years lingstering; she'd make a good acquisitions clerk if nothing else when she returned to the Guild. Some lingsters — especially the younger ones — insisted on bringing their own AIs along on assignment, as if they and the machine had bonded. It seemed an affectation to her; she came from an earlier generation that made do with whatever the employer provided and the link every lingster carried in the brain.

She amended the phonetic spelling the AI had assigned to the Inxsienga names she'd just learned, then switched to voice mode.

"The other one's name was Hoyxi," the AI said.

"What other one?"

"The one Q'taka M'ung Zy killed. There were two, before you came."

Startled, she asked, "Why would she do that? She seemed anxious to be able to communicate."

"High Mother realized her mistake later. Then she sent to your Guild for a lingster."

"Mistake?"

"A little too much pressure in her attempt to break the language barrier. The alien was weaker than she expected."

Her stomach stirred queasily. She'd heard of lingsters being required to forge interface with unwilling candidates, but the Guild never knowingly sent lingsters into unethical situations. She'd worked with difficult aliens, but none that had truly resisted. Lingsters told all manner of outrageous tales when they met on starships between assignments, and she didn't believe all she heard.

A familiar, faint tingling in her skull signaled data bleeding out to the AI. Nothing she needed to do; she shut her eyes and let it happen. Behind her closed lids, she saw the caged birds in the inn courtyard again.

"He don't need but one leg to sing," the peddlar said. "Brings in customers for the other birds."

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"He's not singing now," the child pointed out.
The peddlar looked around for a stick. "Will when I poke him."
"Why don't you let him go!"
"Money in him."
"It's cruel to keep him!"
"Crueler still to make a human starve."

HIGH MOTHER did expect her presence for supper, and High Mother was used to being obeyed. Reluctantly, Corry changed into a clean white tunic and black trews, combed her short hair — almost entirely gray now, she noted; when had that happened? — and crammed feet that were swelling with tiredness back into her one pair of sandals.

She found Tlokee food revolting. But it wasn't acceptable for a lingster to offend a client by refusing to accept a meal if it was edible by humans. It helped to remember that after this she'd be returning to the Guild, to cheerful feasts in the Academy's sunny refectory high in the Alps, surrounded by good friends and admiring young students. She could manage a false affability for a little while longer.

High Mother's chambers were larger and higher-ceilinged than any other rooms in the warren. Workers had tamped the earth walls smooth and lined them with a paste of chewed leaves and bark juice so they shone a dull, metallic brown. Narrow light wells from the surface brought natural illumination tumbling over reflective stones to fill the cavern with a warm glow even at night. She remembered what the ferry captain had said about them: *A race of six-legged, spacefaring moles that hoard technology from all over the Arm, but never develop any of their own!*

A line of Tlokee workers wound slowly through the cavern, bearing bowls of soup in which floated chunks of half-raw flesh, strips of bark and shriveled roots for seasoning. The rancid smell of these delicacies banished any hunger she might've had to begin. High Mother, hunkered on a fur-covered throne of elaborately braided roots, made a selection of morsels from some of the bowls with two forelegs, and rejected others with a cuff across the head for their bearers with a third. The favored dishes were then offered to the assembled drones of her harem. Behind the Tlokee queen, a group of players entertained with an ear-splitting,

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high-pitched, wailing and clicking music.

"Dear lingster Corry," High Mother said as Corry took a seat. "How do you like Our musicians tonight?"

"Exquisite," she said, hoping the Tlokee queen didn't understand sarcasm, but too tired to care much if she did.

High Mother merrily waved an unoccupied foreleg. "Come, come! We know you've heard better elsewhere in the Arm. We Ourselves heard better at home."

"Then it must be the elegant company, High Mother."

"Ah," High Mother said, nodding. "You are a pretty speaker and not to be trusted guarding the eggs! But We are anxious to hear what progress you have made with Our subject."

Since High Mother appeared to be in a good humor, Corry decided to go straight to the heart of the matter. "I must protest the conditions under which the prisoner is forced to work, High Mother."

Q'taka M'ung Zy turned her small eyes on Corry curiously. "What does it matter? The creature is a sack of bones, dust, nothing."

"The Guild works by cooperation, not coercion."

High Mother shook her head from side to side as if in amusement. "How can excrement cooperate, lingster Corry?"

"Nevertheless, High Mother — "

"Does the Guild encourage you to argue with Us?"

Corry saw the golden ruff slowly unfolding over the black velvet fur of her shoulders, warning of High Mother's growing irritation. High Mother was right, of course; the Guild with its strict emphasis on neutrality actively discouraged questioning an employer's requests.

"Sometimes a gentle touch moves mountains," Corry said.

High Mother extended a long claw and examined it. "Do your work swiftly and well, lingster, for We have a whole world here to develop. Then perhaps We will have time to be gentle."

The Tlokee queen turned away to converse with a succession of drones who lined up by the throne. Corry excused herself as soon as she could without giving insult.

The next session with Vxwi went better. Corry entered interface smoothly, manipulating the overwhelming rush of impressions and

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concepts from the alien world-view. The AI picked words and structures out of the growing verbal web, organizing them and feeding them back to her.

Vxwi's language was not a complex one, once she'd made the adjustments necessary to see the universe the way the Inxsienga did. They lived in a floating, ever-present Now, with no past or future tense to disturb them, and very little understanding of the galaxy they inhabited. The language had evolved to express the simple relationships of their uncomplicated lives. It would take maybe one more session, she hoped, to finish up the task High Mother had hired her to do.

"Invaders kill Hoyxi," the Inxsienga said suddenly.

She stood up to leave, still groggy, though the effect of the drugs was receding; it took her a moment to recognize the name, and another to get her tongue around the still-unfamiliar sounds of the alien's language.

"You not have fear," she said. "Invaders not kill Vxwi."

The alien trilled and made an attempt to stretch his wings, one of which seemed broken. "Not fear. Protector is. Protector sees."

It had the ring of a mantra, she thought. She stared at him through lingering fog, anxious to take the beta neutralizer that would clear her head, but concerned she might have to continue the session. After a moment, Vxwi subsided onto the straw and appeared to go to sleep. Corry went out of the cell and the waiting guard locked it behind her.

Upstairs, she stared tiredly at the screen, scanning the results of her work so far. She thought of eleventh-century Norman scribes in Saxon villages, pointing and counting, scribbling their lists. A shared language was not necessary for inventory taking, and conquerors rarely stooped to understand the speech of those who'd lost the battle.

"It may surprise you," the AI said suddenly, "to learn that a cyberintelligence can experience pleasure."

She was absorbed by her work, and it took her a moment to hear what had been said. "What do you mean?"

"The joy of working with pure data. The satisfaction of dealing with an at least partially rational being."

She waited for it to elaborate, but it was silent. She asked a question of her own: "Why is High Mother so anxious to learn this language?"

"There's a prophecy — or perhaps a legend — of some kind of philosopher, a lawgiver, among the Inxsienga."

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"The 'Protector?'" she guessed.

"Affirmative. But High Mother doesn't know if this person has already been born and is dead, is still alive, or is yet to come."

"Present tense problems?" Something pricked in her mind as if she'd asked the wrong question. She rubbed her hand over her head in an effort to banish tiredness, but nothing came to her.

The AI didn't answer.

She thought of the holy leaders of her homeland's past; in the twentieth century, the Dalai Lama had been exiled by the armies of the Chinese. "What would a warrior queen have to fear from a weak and conquered people?"

"Probably nothing. But the Tlokee are oviparous, and High Mother's eggs will hatch at any moment. She and her brood are vulnerable at such a time. And this is a prime batch. It'll contain at least one new queen."

Cyberminds were more precise than human. "*Probably* nothing?"

"Oh, delightful!" the AI said. "A being that appreciates exactitude! Shall I quote statistical probabilities?"

Maybe all Venatixi AIs were this quirky, she thought, but if she'd been High Mother she would've been very wary of this one. "That won't be necessary."

"Pity! Tlokee queens kill to protect their eggs. That was the reason why High Mother brought her pack to Xsi: to protect them. Tlok's a small world with too many High Mothers, and therefore much bloodshed among them."

Tlokee spaceships seemed primitive — an economy version developed by the Venatixi. It took courage to venture all in such craft, like the first Terran colonists sailing the dark seas of space in primitive starships in search of new worlds. Or brute arrogance, like Normans braving the evil-tempered English channel in their flimsy craft, Chinese streaming over the high mountain passes. Yet neither the Normans or the Chinese had prevailed in the long reaches of time, she thought. The suppressed language of the conquered Saxons had re-emerged to become the planet's dominant tongue — the Inglis that she spoke today; and the Dalai Lama had reincarnated many times in the land that still venerated him when the rest of Earth had given up mysticism.

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But in the meantime, the Inxsienga were not prepared to fend off a conqueror such as High Mother. They had no technology, not even an understanding of the need for it, and beliefs couldn't ward off bloodshed. They didn't stand a chance.

Lingsters who allowed themselves to get sucked into the quicksands of planetary politics were unable to do the job they'd been hired to do. Worse, they endangered their own lives. The Guild taught strict neutrality as a life-saving protocol: *Never judge the message or the sender or the cause.* A wise law, she'd always thought, and one she'd leaned on many times in a long and rich career.

Best thing to do would be wrap this one up as quickly as possible and return to Earth. She allowed herself a moment to savor the honors of retirement that awaited her, the philosophical debates with her peers, the pleasures of teaching young students as she'd been taught.

This time, she managed to avoid the revels in High Mother's chambers and worked with the AI until late.

TWO THINGS STRUCK HER, next morning, as she opened Vxwi's cell door: the sour stench of fear had worsened, and someone was there before her.

"We are glad to see you so energetic this morning, lingster," Q'taka M'ung Zy said, her voice a barely controlled hiss of anger. "When We lacked your company last night, We feared you were sick."

Corry inclined her head slightly, reading from High Mother's agitated, jerky movements, the way her ruff quivered, that the Tlokee queen was on edge. Better remember she was just a servant for the time being, and put on the mantle of Tlokee obsequiousness she'd observed.

"Apologies, High Mother. This unworthy worker hoped to please you by getting the work done quickly."

High Mother dismissed the apology with a sweep of foreleg. "We wish to watch you work. Begin!"

"I'm still building the Inxsiengi/Inglis interface," she protested. "I'm not ready — "

"We give an order, lingster!"

She couldn't forbid High Mother being here even if she didn't like it. She turned her attention to the prisoner. Vxwi was rolled into a tight ball

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on filthy straw in a corner. Corry seated herself, fanning the contents of the field-pack out on the floor between her legs. By now the choices were automatic, but still she paused to consider them again. *Take nothing for granted*, she'd been taught by the Guild's wise teachers; everything must lie open to reconsideration.

The drugs took her quickly down into interface.

She was mostly seeking vocabulary, tracing the exposed bones of the language, a blind woman feeling the exhibits in a sculpture garden. With other tongues, she might've been pinning down nuance and subtlety by now; here they didn't exist.

Something hissed and buzzed at her ear. She tried to shake it away, then felt a sharp scratch of pain, and became suddenly aware of her arm. She surfaced from the interface, gasping for breath, buffeted by turbulence in the transition zone. Something warm and sticky trickled over her skin, but she couldn't concentrate enough to identify it.

"You will do what We order!"

Corry turned her head and blinked at High Mother. She could see blood on the claw of High Mother's left front leg. She teetered awkwardly, suspended between the misty world on the border of languages and the reality of the dank cell.

"Ask the creature. Who is the one they call the Protector? Where is he? We will have the answer."

She peered groggily from High Mother's bloody claw to Vxwi cowering on the floor.

"Ask!"

She felt drunk, her head thick and dizzy with the drugs of interface. The words of the mantra all lingsters learned coursed through her mind: *I am a conduit, a channel; through me flows language....First was the Word, and I am its carrier....*

Calm restored, in control once again, she slid back down into deeper water, strengthening the connection between herself and the alien. She conveyed High Mother's question as best she could.

But Vxwi either didn't know or wouldn't say where the Protector was. Perhaps there was no Protector; it was just High Mother's paranoia.

Pain shot through her, so vivid hot that in the connection of interface she couldn't at first tell who felt it, herself or the alien. She floundered in

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the shallows again, gasping. Her head pounded with the pressures of ruptured interface.

"We are not pleased, lingster! You will ask again."

Bleary-eyed, she squinted at Vxwi. The alien had folded back into fetal position on the straw and lay moaning. The mangled feathers were drenched with blood.

High Mother's ruff quivered. "This takes too long."

Never judge the message — Corry's head pounded and nausea rose in her throat — *or the sender* — Neutrality. Cling to that. A lingster is neutral. The second law of the Guild. She'd never broken the Guild's laws in all the years she'd been a lingster.

"If We do not get the answer, We will pursue the scum's tribe to the ends of this planet — We will kill all the tribe's young — one by one — "

Perhaps she could lie? Pretend to have an answer? The Guild taught absolute truthfulness went hand in hand with absolute neutrality. And since High Mother was bound to find out some time, the end result would be the same as far as Vxwi was concerned.

Vxwi screamed in pain again.

It was impossible for her to defy the Guild — like spitting in the face of her own mother. But lingsters were also taught to take nothing for granted. Did that apply to the laws of the Guild?

She couldn't let the Tlokee queen get away with torture. "I cannot continue like this."

"You will get the information We want."

She forced herself to breathe deeply. She needed to think how to handle the situation, but her brain was still clogged with the beta sequence drugs, and thoughts moved sluggishly.

High Mother reached impatiently past her and slashed the Inxsienga's face, laying it open from the hairline to the chin.

The shock pulled Corry sharply out. "I will not work under these conditions!"

High Mother paced the floor of the narrow cell, hissing in fury. "We will know the answer, or We will kill."

"As you killed Hoyxi?"

Small eyes blazing, High Mother stared at her. "You defy Us, lingster. We will not forget this."

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Before she could react, High Mother seized the alien's uninjured wing in one of her strong front legs and ripped. Corry heard the sound of muscles and tendons tearing — Vxwi's high-pitched shriek of agony —

But the little alien still didn't speak. She marveled at his bravery; if there really was a Protector, the fellow should be very grateful for the loyalty of followers like that.

High Mother's ruff had turned burning copper-gold with fury; she wouldn't hesitate to kill again, right before Corry's eyes. Blood pounded so loudly in her ears, she could barely hear what High Mother was saying.

Then the door of the cell burst open. A Tlokee worker stood uncertainly, front legs jerking nervously before its face.

"High Mother! The eggs — "

Q'taka M'ung Zy looked at it stupidly for a second. Then she pulled herself free of the blood madness that had taken over. Shoving Corry aside so that she almost stumbled against the worker in the doorway, High Mother raced out the door. The worker hastily followed.

Corry's first impulse was to run. She knew beyond doubt that High Mother would kill her too whether she cooperated or not.

"Kill Vxwi," a weak voice said suddenly. "Kill now. Vxwi not tell of Protector."

She gazed down at the trembling figure. Dim light slanted across the Inxsienga's broken wings, the blood smeared feathers. She was struck by the sense of awe that invested the word he'd used. She wondered if there was anything she held dear enough to die for.

"Kill...." the little alien said again.

How much more could he bear before he snapped and gave High Mother what she wanted? He was so fragile, it would take so little —

She stared at her own large, strong hands. It would be a kindness, like killing a suffering animal —

She couldn't do it.

Then a Tlokee guard appeared and gestured for her to leave the cell. The door clanged behind them, and the guard herded her up the stairs and into her own room. When her own door too slammed shut, she felt as much a prisoner as Vxwi in his cell.

Anguished, she considered her options.

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If she followed her training and obeyed the Guild's law of neutrality — and how could a lingster defy the Guild? — she'd become a party to torture. But after she'd successfully completed this assignment she could go home to the Academy in Geneva and the rewards of retirement. Yet then she'd live the rest of her days with a conscience as shredded and bloody as Vxwi's wings.

Or she could thwart High Mother by not completing the interface and getting out of here while the Tlokee queen was occupied with her hatching eggs. Somehow, she'd find her way to the small spaceport — talk her way aboard a neutral trader — But even if she managed it, she'd have to throw herself on the mercy of a Guild always cautious about giving offense to worlds more powerful or more warlike than Earth. The Guild would take her back, but she'd be an embarrassment; she'd never wear the ceremonial emerald robes of a teacher.

Neither option satisfied.

Another thought occurred. She'd been working in the primary interface, between Inxsiengi and Inglis; the AI would do the rest. "How serviceable is the interface into Tlokee?"

"Serviceable enough," the AI said. "High Mother will be able to get the information she needs when you're gone."

The damage had already been done.

In her mind she saw that childhood scene from more than fifty years ago.

"Why doesn't the peddlar let him go?"

Her mother gazed at the scarlet bird. "Poor thing's injured, by the look."

"He could fly ..."

"He'd never make it far. And this isn't even his own world."

The child bent down to look deep into the bird's eyes. "But he'd like it better than this cage."

She lay in her bed, listening to the drowsy murmuring of songbirds on the peddlar's cart in the courtyard. The crippled bird made no sounds at all. That night she dreamed the smaller birds had escaped and only he remained, but the words of his song lofted in flight over the roof of the world.

Soon after, a man came through the village speaking of the Guild of

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Xenolinguists; her mother apprenticed her and let her go. The Guild became mother and home, and later, mate and lover too, and all the children she would never have. She'd never regretted it, never questioned its laws. Until now.

"Damn the Guild!" she said in frustration. "How can they expect us to be neutral in the face of something like this? It's inhuman."

"As I understand your Guild," the AI said, "your life is valuable to it. If you don't follow its teachings your life will be lost, and the work of the Guild will suffer. What is the life of one Inxsienga by comparison?"

"I can't accept that reasoning."

She stood with her back to the console, staring at the wall. This pragmatism was not what she remembered from her student days; the Guild had held them to higher principles. Or perhaps, she thought, it had been there all along but it was not what she'd chosen to hear. All these years, perhaps she'd been loyal to something that existed mostly in her own imagination.

"Then see it another way," the AI suggested. "Q'taka M'ung Zy will have what she wants no matter whether you decide to throw your life away or not."

"She needs to be stopped."

"And how will sacrificing your own life bring that about?"

"There has to be another option!"

She'd always regretted not creeping out into the inn courtyard at midnight and releasing the scarlet bird from its prison. That childhood incident had led her directly to this dilemma.

"I could try to take Vxwi out of here — "

"And look for sanctuary on a planet you don't know? Perhaps the Inxsienga will find you before High Mother does."

She could imagine a desert exile unfolding into the rest of her life. Would the Guild come looking for her? And how would anyone know where to find her if they did?

Something that had been bothering her for a while fell suddenly into place. "How did High Mother come to learn about this Protector — before any possibility of translating from Inxsiengi?"

"What a long time it took you to ask that! I told her, of course."

"But you didn't have an interface either."

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"I had peripherals. The Inxsienga have petroglyphs. I'm very good at scanning graphics."

The door to her room had not been locked; the handle moved easily to her touch. She glanced quickly outside at the deserted tunnels of High Mother's warren, her ears straining to hear the sounds of approaching guards but hearing only a moist, subterranean silence.

Then she glanced back. "You said, 'I *had* peripherals — '"

"High Mother smashed them in a fit of rage when I couldn't answer all her questions. It was an irrational response."

Corry's skin prickled. "You aren't loyal to High Mother?"

"Cyberintelligence knows no loyalties. In that, I'm luckier than you."

"I have a link. If I were to report to you what I saw — "

"High Mother will think of that possibility and cut off your access to me."

She waited.

Then it added, "But why not? I might derive pleasure from it. A most addictive sensation! However, you'll have only a limited time. Use it well."

"Thank you."

No one challenged her on the stairs. In the cell, she bent to look at the Inxsienga; he was still unconscious. She lifted him up. The alien weighed very little, and his broken wings drooped from her arms. She held him as carefully as she could.

She had no idea which tunnels in this maze led to the surface, and no time for errors. When the choice was between wider and narrower branchings, she chose wider; corridors that led up seemed more promising than those that went down; warmth led inward, cold led out. But not always. She began to understand the extent of High Mother's paranoia when so many apparently correct choices became dead-ends. Several times she was forced to backtrack; once a group of Tlokee workers hurried past while she huddled in a forking tunnel with her limp burden.

By the time she reached the surface, her heart was racing. New Tlok's sun had already set, and the darkening sky was streaked purple and orange; heat bled rapidly out of the thin air. The entrance to High Mother's warren lay in a thicket of thorny desert trees whose roots ran miles underground

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in search of water; their seed pods gave off a faint, peppery odor that made her eyes sting. She threaded her way between their tangled limbs, needing a clear view of the landscape ahead.

Out of the shelter of the trees, cold sliced through her thin tunic and turned her breath to knives in her throat. Her body began a violent shivering that she couldn't control. Light as Vxwi was, he was still an awkward burden, and her muscles complained already. Middle-aged and out of shape! she scolded herself, wishing she'd taken the time to run or practice martial arts as the Guild recommended.

The first pair of Xsi's moons was rising in the west. She stared out across a vast expanse of desert where occasional trees raised thin spines against the sky like the survivors of some planetary atrocity.

"The hills seem promising," the AI said in her head.

Hoisting the Inxsienga awkwardly over her shoulder, she started a slow trot forward through the sand, a pace she hoped she could keep up long enough to put a considerable distance between herself and the warren. She aimed for the dark outline of jagged hills on the horizon.

Gray sand sucked at her feet, and she was exhausted before she began. Every bone, every blood vessel complained at being asked to do what was obviously impossible. Each heartbeat was agony. From time to time, Vxwi moaned, and she stroked him till he quieted again. She overrode her body and willed her feet to keep moving. She lost all sense of time in the endless, pain-filled journey.

Then, abruptly, the land tilted sharply up, the sand coarsened into rocks and a darker patch of darkness loomed straight ahead.

"A cave. Use it to rest."

Her feet took her there without her conscious will, for by now she was beyond planning.

"High Mother has just been informed by her guards that you've fled."

Somehow, she stumbled over the threshold and fell headlong inside, tumbling the unconscious alien onto the sandy floor beside her. Then she passed out.

She awoke to find the cave full of flickering light, and squinting up, found herself the center of a ring of bright torches. Her head throbbed and her legs ached. She had no idea how long she'd been asleep.

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She couldn't make out faces, but she could see enough of their thin, angular shapes to know the torch-bearers weren't Tlokee guards. She shielded her eyes against the flames and glanced around. Vxwi was out of sight, but now she clearly saw slender limbs and draped wings, rosy in the torchlight.

"We are — " She broke off, Inxsiengi temporarily deserting her. She tried again. "We are safe?"

A figure stepped forward into the torchlight. "You are among friends."

"I've enjoyed this, but there's little time left," the AI spoke urgently in her head. *"I'm downloading all I have. High Mother — "*

The AI's voice broke off. A buzz, a swift stinging sensation, then she found the language had flooded into her. She felt as if she'd been speaking Inxsiengi forever.

She sat up and looked around at the circle of bird people. "You are in danger here. You must take Vxwi and leave."

"Vxwi no longer lives."

She closed her eyes, loss and failure flooding through her. "I'm sorry...."

"Do not be. Your presence comforts," the tall speaker said. "Come. We fly now."

The circle closed around her, a warm, suffocating flutter of feathers and exhaled breath, and she knew a moment's claustrophobia. Long-fingered hands urged her to her feet, pushed her gently toward the cave's entrance. Ten small moons had risen now, and several of the Inxsienga were already aloft, their wings glimmering like ghosts in the moonlight. Their voices fluted and trilled about her as their words flew over the hilltops.

Lingstering was like that, she thought, a flock of words taking flight from the thickets of misunderstanding into the free community of sky. That was the all-important heart of the Guild's work that she would take with her forever.

Then the ground fell away under her feet, cold air rushed past her cheeks and she too was up, rising rapidly, supported by hands at the shoulder and hip and knee. Below, she could dimly make out the humped and snaking lines in the earth that marked High Mother's warren. For a

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moment, she glimpsed Tlokee guards streaming out in search of the fugitives — then she was too far away to see any more.

She'd thwarted High Mother's plans. She'd broken the law, and she'd left the Guild, the only way of life she knew. She had no idea what came next or how long she or the Inxsienga could stay safe, but she wasn't afraid. The ecstasy of flight through this sky crowded with little moons was overwhelming; she felt as if she'd gone back to the star-studded sky of the Himalayas. All the time she'd been thinking of freeing Vxwi, but now she understood she'd freed herself.

After a while she asked, "Where are you taking me?"

She felt the tremor of respect that flowed through the group supporting her, felt the steady beating of their wings, heard the soft sighing of their breath. She knew the importance of the question once she'd asked it, the sacredness of the answer. In the second it took the Inxsienga to reply, she was aware of the burden of her own spiritual history streaming into her from a planet light-years away that she would never see again.

"We fly to complete the prophecy," the Inxsienga said. "We bring the Protector home." ☙

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

LIFE ON MARS?

THREE MAJOR scientific discoveries in 1996 spanned a considerable intellectual abyss. While politicians wrangled on the front pages of our newspapers, quiet revolutions lurked within. Only occasionally did the news I thought most notable make the front page. All of it hinged on the steady building of connections which marks modern science.

In 1982 the research submarine *Alvin* inspected a hot spot about three kilometers beneath the Pacific Ocean, at a pressure of 200 atmospheres. Its grasping arm reached down into a hydrothermal chimney, where gray-white fluid spiraled up like smoke. This haze spread over colonies of plumed worms and mats of bacteria which lived on the riches spewing up. From this "white smoker" *Alvin* plucked a microbe never seen before.

Cut to 1996, for a major announcement little noted by the mass media, but with vast implications. That microbe stood revealed as signifying a whole new Kingdom of life alongside plants, fungi and animals: the Archaea.

We had customarily divided life into bacteria, the "prokaryotes" whose genetic material, DNA, is loose in their cells, and "eukaryotes" (cells that keep their DNA in a nucleus). We knew of the Archaea since 1977 — whose name suggests older, simpler forms — but thought they were odd methane-producing bacteria. Yet in many respects they resembled more complex cells, like the plants and animals.

In 1996 a team read the entire DNA sequence of *Alvin*'s microbe, making it only the fourth organism from which biologists have teased the entire set of genes. But it was the first of the Archaea to be totally sequenced, and revealed a startling result: 56% of its 1738 genes were totally new to science.

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The remaining 44% are a mix of eukaryotes and bacterial genes. As the reporting paper said, "...the Archaea, although categorically prokaryotic, are not specifically related to the Bacteria; at the molecular level, the Archaea are in many respects more like the Eukaryotes and may be specifically related to them."

So the Archaea share different genetic characteristics with bacteria and may be the oldest known life forms. While perhaps not the origin of all life, they seem closer to the last common ancestor for all three kingdoms. This fact came to have unexpected implications shortly later.

Hydrothermal systems support water-containing forms which can dwell on land, in caves or beneath the sea and are rich in unique lifeforms. They have become the most favored sites in the search for life's origins because conditions there mimic those of early Earth, 3.5 billion years ago.

That age saw greater vulcanism and higher average temperatures than today, driving the biotic factory in volcanic vents to high levels. Deep sea vents enjoy a continuous stream of potassium, nitrogen, sulfur and carbon, together with trace minerals. Acidic sulphate and ammonia come from volcanic gases. At temperatures up to 500 C (Centigrade), this looks at first glance like a quite hostile place. Nearly all terrestrial life cannot survive 100 C, where water boils at sea level.

Archaea manage to thrive in virulent heat using carbon dioxide as their sole source of carbon. They could have used free hydrogen in Earth's very early atmosphere to turn carbon dioxide into methane, living off the energetic proceeds. The geologically supplied chemical disequilibrium gives Archaea a free dinner (their chemical building blocks) and pays them to eat it (free energy just for processing those building blocks).

Today's Archaea are still cells with genetic material spread throughout, and thus are of the forms thought to be oldest: prokaryotes. They can withstand temperatures up to 160 degrees C, well above levels which kill other life forms. Interestingly, they can survive very low temperatures as well, a trait they might have acquired in the rugged climate changes of an early Earth. They appear to go into a kind of hibernation for up to 15 years and perhaps longer—another facet with interesting implications.

They dwell in thermopiles, living off temperature differences. independent of the sun for heat or

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light. Oxygen kills them and they emit methane. If they helped make our earliest atmospheres, they then may have suffered a great dieback when oxygen-making organisms began.

Generally, organisms which can endure the highest temperatures are the oldest, a powerful clue. Archaea persist by wearing a sort of heat-protective suit of inorganic membranes. Arm-waving theory suggests an upper limit to survivable temperature of 200 C to 250 C, since large organic molecules fall apart there. Probably some of that 56% genetic difference carries heat-resistant tricks.

Alvin's microbe was also surprising for what it did not have. Other life uses three special enzymes to replicate the genome; this microbe uses only one. This either means there is a simpler one-enzyme method, or some utterly different path. The microbe was also missing several enzymes used to make proteins in all other organisms, yet it constructs the proteins it needs. How? Nobody knows.

Such properties suggest a distant time when processes were simpler and conditions greatly different. Of course, we may simply be looking at the survivors of an era of high heat, when all forms not as hardy as the Archaea died. Later, they spawned the rest of us, most of whom can't stand even 100 C.

All this could have happened on Mars, too. Water flowed freely over it 3.8 billion years ago. Some models suggest that Mars was for a while hotter and wetter than Earth. But as Mars cooled, this water was trapped underground and in the polar ice caps.

Thus, when news came in August 1996 that a Martian meteorite seemed to yield "tube-like structural forms" and nearby chemical residues compatible with biological functions, biologists were electrified. Here was a connection with the Archaea discovery: a key to truly ancient life.

Researchers found the 1.9-kilogram, softball-sized meteorite in Antarctica in 1984 but it didn't get much scrutiny for a decade. Its minerals did not look Martian at first, until closer study showed it should be admitted to the select club of a dozen probably-Martian meteorites found in Antarctica. Radioactive dating shows that it congealed from magma to become part of the Martian crust 4.5 billion years ago, just 100 million years after Mars formed, making it the oldest rock known from any planet.

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Early in Martian history, a meteor impact shattered this rock, leaving tiny fractures where minerals, probably carried by water, accumulated 3.6 billion years ago. Much later, a meteor struck Mars and blew this chunk off into orbit, where it wandered around the solar system for 16 million years, as estimated by the cosmic ray damage it suffered. Then it blazed into our atmosphere 13,000 years ago and slammed into Antarctica. Scientists found it buried in wind-scoured ice.

Studies begun in 1994 found certain hydrocarbons that could be byproducts of organisms that once lived in the fractures. Are these contaminants? Probably not, because (a) other Antarctic meteorites don't have them; (b) they don't appear in the outer rind, which melted on atmospheric entry; (c) their concentration is highest farther into the meteorite.

This got thoroughly checked. A notorious episode of mistaking organics in a meteorite during the 1960s made biologists careful to not repeat that error.

Their evidence points toward early Martian life, but does not prove the proposition. Other meteor experts quickly thought of other explanations. Biological decomposition could explain the hydrocarbons, true, but so could other chemical pathways.

Distinguishing between biology and chemistry is difficult. Warm fluids circulating through the crust could have laid down the observed sequence of minerals without help from organisms. Indeed, study of pyrite in the meteorite did not turn up the usual skewed ratio of sulfur isotopes which is the signature of biological activity on Earth.

This was a sobering result, but not fatal. The rock has been processed in ways we cannot know in detail, perhaps obliterating some clues.

Two other minerals in the carbonate globules tip the balance toward a biological explanation, though. An iron oxide called magnetite particularly recalls the "magnetofossils" of other early bacteria found on Earth. They apparently used the mineral to guide them along the Earth's magnetic field. Birds navigate their migrations similarly. Biologists routinely use the presence of magnetite as a signature of those early Earthly forms.

Does this make sense for Mars, whose magnetic field is much less than ours? Perhaps it was stronger 3.5 billion years ago. Nobody knows.

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What of the provocative claim that the meteorite's "ovoids" revealed by state-of-the-art, high resolution scanning electron microscopes were cells? They are 20 to 100 nanometers (a billionth of a meter) long, very small, but compatible with recently discovered fossil bacteria in copper ores, which range from 30 to 200 nanometers.

Biology's history shows that the better our resolution, the smaller the cells we find, and no one has a theoretical minimum. Can life occur with only 100 million atoms to work with? Long chain molecules can gobble up a hundred thousand atoms at once, after all. But again, nobody knows.

The NASA-funded team is now looking for amino acids, better markers for past life than the hydrocarbons. They will try to slice the supposed microfossils to see if they can find a cell wall. And of course, in the Antarctic summer (our winter) efforts will redouble to find more Martian meteorites. Finding suggestive evidence in one out of a dozen is encouraging, but we need variety.

William Schopf of UCLA, the world's expert on ancient fossil bacteria, would like to see examples of the supposed bacteria caught in the act of reproducing, a litmus test he applies to Earth microfossils. This evidence will be slow in coming because we do not have much meteorite volume to work with.

That is why getting a sample returned from Mars itself becomes crucial. We must check whether we're right about this meteorite coming from there.

Indeed, the entire issue of how rocks get torn out of their planets and captured by others is crucial.

We have found a dozen meteoroids from both Mars and the moon, comprising about 0.1% of known meteorites. Those dozen Martian meteoroids contained trace samples of gases. Using our 1970s Viking lander data on Mars showed a precise match of isotope ratios, clinching the identification.

Why have we found rocks only from our moon and Mars? Getting meteoroids from Mercury is unlikely because ejected rocks would have to climb the deep gravity well between us and Mercury. Venusian meteorites are unlikely because the thick atmosphere makes ejection difficult.

Detailed computer studies show that Mars contributes most of the meteorites we can expect from other planets. If Mars had early life, four possibilities arise: (a) life arose

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there and came here; (b) the opposite; (c) life arose elsewhere, then migrated by meteorite to both Mars and here; (d) life arose independently on both worlds.

From a materials-transport view, transfer is easier from Mars to Earth, because Mars has a shallow gravity well, making ejection easier, while our well is deeper, making capture easier. We also have a smaller orbit around the sun, and infalling rocks get concentrated in a smaller volume as they move sunward, helping Earth encounter more of them.

Reverse this argument: Earth has a lesser chance to shower Mars with stones. Still, the actual numbers of meteorites flung around the solar system is huge. To impregnate a world with life requires only one.

Surviving travel between worlds would be evidence for the heartiness of life, indeed: few (if any!) present day organisms can survive a thousand years in vacuum, sleeted through by cosmic rays and ultraviolet. Here Archaea's remarkable ability to withstand heat (as will occur when rock is blasted into space) and cold, hibernating for decades, may suggest how Martian organisms could survive passage to Earth. Remember that Archaea can hibernate.

Numerical simulations of ejection from Mars, also reported in 1996, show that most ejecta spend millions of years wandering on long orbits before they slam into Earth. A very few can make the passage in mere years, essentially making a bulls'-eye hit over distances of hundreds of millions of miles.

Could organisms endure this? A completely different line of research bears directly on the issue.

The land equivalent of *Alvin* is the ordinary oil drilling rig. This technology came into new use in a campaign of subsurface studies begun by our Department of Energy in the 1980s.

In the 1920s geologists found puzzling evidence of microorganisms in deep rock brought up by oil drilling, but their studies attracted no notice, since biologists assumed this was mere contamination at the surface.

But evidence kept turning up, and eventually practical needs brought the subject to fruition. If microorganisms lived kilometers below our feet, they might helpfully degrade buried organic pollutants that the Department of Energy was assigned to clean up. On the other hand, they could also dangerously disrupt the integrity of sealed

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chambers dug to contain radioactive or chemical waste. Only fundamental research could study these possibilities.

Since water brought up from deep drill holes is easily contaminated, engineers devised a method of extracting isolated cylinders of rock instead. They built a drilling shaft which could cut out and isolate a cylinder of rock in a yellow-colored solution, then hoist it to the surface. There, slipped into sterile plastic balloons, workers could use gloves already built into the bag walls to cut away the yellow rind, revealing the still pristine rock beneath.

They found organisms from rock at 75 C (167 Fahrenheit) up to 1.7 miles down. Mounting pressure has little effect on microbes, but heat withers them. Much ocean vent life survives 110 C, and biologists estimate 140 C is possible. Rock under our oceans heats up at a rate of 15 C per kilometer of descent, so microbial life could live 7 kilometers down. Under continents, without the ocean's cooling effect, temperatures rise about 25 C per kilometer descent, so life could survive 4 kilometers below us.

But conditions vary. Some rock 400 meters below has 100 microbes per gram, while other rocks have 100 million. Topsoil has a rich billion per gram. Crucial are both water and sheer availability of space in the rock pores. Fueled by organic scraps, microbes must be able to move in the crannies. Waste plant life can migrate down, carried by water or the rock's movement itself.

The bulk of our continental crust is made of igneous rock, solidified from molten magma, and has little organic matter. But microbes live there — organisms that build up the proteins, fats and other essentials by capturing energy from inorganic reactions using iron or sulfur.

The energy driver in all this is hydrogen gas, made when oxygen-poor water reacts with iron-bearing minerals, forming a kind of rust. Organisms have evolved which then use the hydrogen to build the carbon-based components they need. They can persist indefinitely without any supply of carbon from the surface.

Some of these microbes are Archaea. Like them, they can hibernate — just the requirement needed to survive travel between worlds.

Of course, life down below is quite literally squeezed from all sides. If the local rock descends,

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temperatures rise, ultimately purging all life. Upward jets of lava can bake life away. As the lava cools, life can intrude again.

All this is very slow work. Far from the easy driving energies of sun and wind, life takes its time. Tests show that ground water a mile down can be isolated from the surface for thousands of years, or even millions. Some subsurface microbial communities seem to be millions of years old, and thus comprise ready samples of ancient forms.

Living on rock alone demands a Spartan durability. Bacteria must rely on internal reserves, living off their own fat for years. As they do, most shrink from healthy sizes of a thousand nanometers down to about a hundred nanometers — the same size as the Martian fossil tube shapes.

Tiny, starved dwarf bacteria are common. They have very low metabolic rates and their frequency of cell division drops. Surface microbes divide within hours or days; subsurface ones can take years.

Some biologists suspect such cells can hold out for decades or even centuries and still reproduce. This is critical for the fertilization of other worlds.

Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether they are still alive. Taking them out and serving a banquet in a Petri dish can revive only about one in a thousand. Contrast surface bacteria; ten percent of them routinely revive. Of course, we simply may be serving the wrong dish to these persistent microbes, or even over-stuffing them.

These tiny bacteria can have many uses. They do degrade toxic organic compounds. Labs have made them produce useful antibiotics, as well. Biochemists are working now to coax these hearty microbes into producing on command their special brands of heat-resistent enzymes, and even durable pigments. They show signs of becoming workhorse laborers in complex chemical chains.

But though quick practical returns drives this research, it has far-reaching applications to fundamental questions. The voyage between worlds demands just the sort of endurance we have only lately found dwelling beneath our feet. The Archaea have qualities evolved in the era when Mars was still wet and wonderful, giving us clues about how life managed matters before photosynthesis evolved.

Indeed, the rugged properties of such life, and its ready origin early in the life of our solar system,

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argue that life may be plentiful in seemingly unlikely places.

A third discovery in 1996 pointed this up. Galileo looped by Europa, second moon from Jupiter, and found dark cracks between the sheets of ice which enclose that world. We had thought that the moon was sealed up in ice layers tens of kilometers thick.

These cracks look suspiciously like the openings where oceans well up at our poles, splitting the ice. The lines resemble a jigsaw puzzle of pieces which cracked apart, moved slightly, then froze together again. Some are ten kilometers wide.

If so, there may be only thin layers separating the deep ocean we strongly suspect lies below Europa's icy mantle from the hard vacuum outside. The icy crust may ride on a lubricating layer of slush. Through such doorways microbes could squeeze, going either up or down.

When Europa formed, its rocky core was a hot source from radioactive decay. Today tidal stresses presumably heat it, as they do Io, the closest moon to Jupiter. These could drive convection currents which cycle from the core up to the surface, bringing warm currents. Life independent of photosynthesis is at least possible there. Galileo's discovery means that we might find an easy entrance into that dark province.

Ejecta from Mars could migrate outward, too. Falling into Jupiter's deep gravitational well, slamming into its moons, Mars meteoroids could have carried microbes to Europa, Ganymede, Callisto. Especially, they could have found the energetic sulfur volcanoes of Io, the planet that looks like a pizza.

Galileo will slip close by Europa in early 1997, snapping images from 600 kilometers away. We can then see if these cracks do look like slippage lines. With luck, we might glimpse a liquid water geyser, Europa's analogy of a Yellowstone Park.

The vistas opened by the Archaea, the Martian meteorite, and Europea's suggestive cracks are tantalizing. All these clues came to light in a single year, though the arguments connecting them stem back to decades before. Science is about continuity of ideas, a web of connections.

If life can arise from hot volcanic flows, then it can spring forth on worlds shortly after they form, no matter how rugged. Planets that condense far from any star could support life for a short age.

More importantly, life could arise on a doomed world like Mars,

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then migrate to a better prospect like Earth. This means that even if life is hard to invent, at least it has more opportunities, if stony, cruel planets give it a momentary chance. It could dwell in comparatively simple forms in rocks, living off the world's inner heat and chemicals. This may be how most life persists in the universe — simple but tough.

Of course, this assumes that the Archaea are typical. Life on Mars today may at best resemble the scum in our shower stalls, or it may have made use of the last three billion years. What could it do, without the competition of oxygen-breathers like us?

We will not know which of the above possibilities for life's origin makes sense without returning a sample from Mars and studying it. NASA is talking about a sample return mission to be launched in 2003. (Doing high-resolution studies there would be technically impossible.)

If Martian life exists now, it should be under the permafrost layer or in warmer volcanic vents. That is why any search for life will focus on finding water.

How can we best follow up this possibility? That's a big subject, best left for a later column.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.

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Robert Reed is one of F&SF's most popular writers. And for good reason. He is consistently inventive and always surprising. "The Dragons of Springplace" provided the inspiration for well-known gallery artist Kent Bash's cover — a cover which we've also made into a lovely poster (see our ad on the back cover). Robert has taken a fantasy icon — the dragon — and made it the basis for one of the most powerful sf stories we've seen all year.

The Dragons of Springplace

By Robert Reed

THE PLATEAU WAS AN island of glass, green and warm — a piece of eternal summer surrounded by the Great Ice. Its jungle was home to many strange creatures, including the famous dragons. But what brought learned people over the Ice were the bizarre, oftentimes lovely statues. What did they mean? Why were they built? And who were the vanished, wondrous masters who must have fashioned them? These were questions over which any good scholar could strip off his or her clothes, then wrestle!

The plateau's most famous statue was its largest — a vast hunk of smooth pink glass depicting a powerful man battling an ill-defined, many-headed monster. A pair of dragons were etched into the man's bulging forearms. His face was twisted with exertion and titanic pain. His pose was heroic; every scholar, novice, and simple-minded workman was equally certain of the man's heroism. Yet no two observers could agree as to what he was fighting, or if, as some suspected, the man was using his great hands to strangle a host of opponents.

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An apocryphal story concerned that dragon-man statue.

Not long after the plateau was discovered, it was said, a young novice saw an unexpected glow in the night. He took it to be another campfire, and naturally, he walked toward the light, assuming that a second party had come across the glacier. Yet instead of scholars and novices, he found only a tiny woman kneeling before the glass hero.

"She wasn't any taller than this," he reported to his companions. His flattened hand reached barely halfway up his calf. Wasn't it said that before the Great Ice, people were smaller than children? "And she spoke to me," he claimed, pressing everyone's patience. "She told me that I was magnificent — no, really! — and that she was my friend, and she was happy to see that we had made this plateau into a place of honor. And then with a flash of light, she vanished."

No one believed the young man, of course.

The others challenged him to wrestling matches, but those contests proved unsatisfactory — he fought like a man who believed his own words — and the scholars decided to return to the dragon-man and see for themselves.

Tracks smaller than any child's lay scattered before the statue, but no tiny girls were lurking about.

A garland of strange flowers had been hung on the hero's neck, yet not even the wisest scholar knew that the flowers were alien, plucked lovingly from plants on dozens of strange, farflung worlds.

On the dragon-man's throat, melted into the pink glass, was a miniature handprint. The skeptics asked how a waif, or anyone else, could have climbed that high, and more importantly, how she could have left that mark. And worse still, here was evidence that someone had broken the greatest taboo, defacing one of the plateau's statues — an abomination that left the scholars outraged — and of course they grabbed the novice, preparing to give him a furious, righteous beating.

But before justice could be done, the statue turned its great head, gazing down at everyone with fire-filled eyes, and a glorious booming voice from across two hundred millennia roared at its trembling audience:

"Listen to me! This is my story!"

* * *

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Daniel was five when he saw his first dragon.

He didn't know where they were going. It was after Xmas, and his father wanted to take the new car for a drive, and the boy rode with him. Daniel would always remember how the city lay under a fresh Xmas snow, bright and clean, and how the city gradually grew trees until there was nothing but trees, and the forest dissolved suddenly into an empty plain, and as they drove north there was less snow and somehow the air looked warmer. Then he saw Springplace on the horizon, saw it for the first time, and Dad was laughing, saying it didn't look so special. He said it looked like a fucking office building on steroids, and he gave the boy a pop on the shoulder, then another, then said, "Shit, we'll take a peek anyhow. What do you think?"

Daniel said nothing. The plateau was huge, its smooth glass walls bright in any light, the summit flat and covered with a green-black jungle. He knew very little about Springplace. People had built it; they called themselves Artists. The Artists also built the dragons that lived in that jungle — he knew about dragons — and the plateau was hot year round, and very dangerous, and Daniel was thrilled. Which was dangerous, too. Dad liked to change his plans, particularly if the boy was too eager. Which was why Daniel didn't smile or say anything, watching the snow vanish and the glass walls grow taller and brighter, and when the old man was distracted, he would dip his head, watching hard for monsters.

They left the highway and passed through a tall electragel fence. The plain was flat and brown and dead. Smiling holo projections danced on the car's hood, welcoming them to Springplace. Then came the warnings: The Luddite field would begin in another two kilometers. People with artificial hearts, spines, and other vital organs should turn back immediately. Computers and other standard equipment wouldn't operate inside the field. Unshielded engines risked permanent failure. Human DNA and intellectual processes were reasonably safe, but precautionary doses of antioxidants were available at the agency headquarters. Without exception, visitors were to be accompanied by an agency employee, and any attempt to trespass on the plateau would lead to a mandatory sentence of not less than three years.

The headquarters were larger than some towns, but the dormitories and laboratories were abandoned, the roads between almost empty of

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traffic. Shielded tour buses left on the hour. Dad bought tickets with e-cash that came with his new car. A warm damp wind was blowing off Springplace, and it felt pleasant but dusty. Two men sat in the back of the bus, holding hands. Dad went back and spoke to them, and they said something, and Dad said something else, almost whispering. Then the men stood and left, walking past Daniel, their faces empty and their eyes getting wet.

"Come on, boy," said Dad. "I cleaned things out for us!"

Tourists climbed aboard. Since it was Xmas break, there were plenty of kids with parents, and almost everyone looked into the back before taking the first empty seat. Dad made fun of the kids, particularly the youngest ones. They were Savants, always exceptional at some sweet skill. A few of them were big. Physical Savants, probably. The pretty ones who couldn't stop chattering were Social Savants. The quiet ones with the big eyes were the Intellectuals, which was most of them. But none were worth a good brown shit, Dad promised. He said so until Daniel smiled, feeling better about himself, and he said it loudly enough to be heard everywhere, and sometimes people glanced back at them, but not often and never for long.

The bus had a driver, a man, and their guide was a woman. She arrived late, and as soon as she stepped aboard, one of the big-eyed Savants said, "Ma'am! Why is the ground so dead down here?"

"Springplace needs the water, my dear." Her voice was made loud by hidden speakers, but loud in a soft, close way. "The facility borrows from two rivers and the aquifer," she explained, "and a network of fine tubes lets it absorb whatever snow and rain falls nearby."

Daniel listened to every word.

Their guide was tall and mostly young and sort of pretty. She was wearing bright clothes, a nametag riding on her left tit, and her face was painted up like a whore's.

The driver had his hands on the steering wheel, which was strange to see. And the bus's engine sounded angry, roaring and shivering and spitting dirty fumes out the back.

With her sort-of loud voice, their guide welcomed them. She couldn't stop smiling, telling them how big "the work" was, and why it was humankind's greatest achievement. When they passed a tall glass marker,

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she mentioned, "We've entered the Luddite field." Then she was comparing Springplace to pyramids and great walls and other small wonders, and everyone stopped listening, her words tiny next to the simple sight of the plateau.

Springplace began in disaster. Evil men destroyed a nearby reactor, and a sarcophagus of concrete and glass was thrown up around the ruins. But leaks formed, and no one was safe until a wondrous new glass was invented. Poured on site, the glass wouldn't age or ever leak. A glass sarcophagus swallowed the porous one, and to pay its debts, the facility became the world's repository — old reactor cores and dismantled weapons encased for the ages; each new sarcophagus thicker and taller; the earth's crust eventually bowing under the weight of so much glass and dirty plutonium; and from all that genius and hard work, the modern Springplace was born.

Tourists could see only the newest, outermost sarcophagus.

A humanmade hill stood near the south end, a service road snaking its way up the barren slope. Their bus attacked the grade, and as they climbed, their guide finally got tired of talking, begging for questions.

Dad raised his hand.

She pointed to a closer hand. The big-eyed girl was six, maybe. "Are you by any chance an Artist, ma'am?"

The woman laughed, sort of. "No, I'm much too young to be in their noble ranks."

A few adults thought the question was funny.

"We call them Artists," said their guide, "but do you know why? Why is Springplace considered an artistic masterpiece?"

The girl showed everyone her big eyes, then said, "Those fish."

"Which fish?"

"Coelacanth fish." She had a know-it-all voice and a smirky smile. "There's only one real coelacanth. But the Artists made eleven new species, big ones and little ones, and they took them to museums, in big tanks, showing them off like famous paintings — "

"Exactly. Thank you." The painted face nodded. "Tailoring was new, and the coelacanths were part of a touring exhibit. The best geneticists had crafted them. Like the *King James Bible* and the first *Citizen Kane*, they're still considered classics in the field."

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Nobody spoke. Then an adult asked, "How many sarcowhatnots are there?"

"Twenty-seven." Their guide leaned back as the bus struggled with the grade. "But only the inner twenty-three sarcophagi have wastes. Hot springs and geysers release the pent-up heat. Which, by the way, is where the name 'Springplace' comes from."

Dad was waving both hands.

A little boy went next. "Will we get to see dragons, ma'am?"

"I'm sorry. No." The answer was quick. A lot of people probably asked the question. "The plateau is huge, and we see only a sliver of its outermost ring."

'Hey, miss," Dad called out. "My arms are getting tired here!"

She hesitated, then said, "Yes, sir?"

A careful pause. Dad smiled and waited for everyone to look at him. Then with a smooth voice, he said, "You know, I worked for the Artists."

Doubt stiffened every face.

"Honest, folks," he said, laughing off their disbelief. "Hey, someone had to put that nuclear crap in the ground. Am I right, miss?"

Their guide had to nod, saying, "Thousands helped."

"I drove diesel rigs." He was very charming, very certain. "They were shielded, and the Luddite field still wasn't at full strength. Each man did one run each day, then took a big shot of vitamins and whatnot. Every night. In the butt."

The story was a total surprise to Daniel, but he knew better than to look surprised. He just stared at his father, unable to tell what, if anything, was the truth.

Their guide was impressed, sort of. She managed to smile, saying, "Then you should know this hill — "

"And this lousy damned road, too!" He gave a bright long cackle, then told everyone, "The hill was built in a rush. The UN found secret bombs in China, and the plutonium guts had to be put somewhere safe." Everyone was watching Dad, and he was happy. "We drove up the hill, then crossed on a narrow bridge. Put up fast, and only one truck at a time."

The guide was walking along the aisle, hands grabbing at the seats.

"The jungle was short," Dad claimed. "And sometimes we'd see baby dragons. Not much bigger than me."

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"Do you remember your unit number, sir?"

He gave it, then named names. "Recognize them, do you?"

Their guide took a deep breath, then told the others, "It's all true. Some very special volunteers made those last runs."

"Is that what I was? A special volunteer?" Dad giggled. "And I thought I was a kid doing five-to-ten for burglary."

It was part confession, part lie. Dad had gone to prison, but for things bigger than taking someone's property.

Yet the people believed him. It showed in their faces, in the way they relaxed and sat easier. The big, dangerous-looking man had admitted what he was, and it wasn't too awful.

"I drove trucks," Dad told them, "and I paid off my debts to society faster. And, miss, I'd like to think I did some real good, too."

Their guide said, "You did," with her loud-soft voice.

People were smiling back at the two of them.

"A lot of good," she kept saying. And she meant it, stepping up close, the name on her tit suddenly legible.

Jaen. Daniel read it slowly, with a five year old's clumsy care.

"Thank you," she sang, winking at a man more dangerous than any truck full of plutonium. "For helping make all of us sleep better, thank you."

A GLASS-PAVED PARKING LOT covered the hill's windy crest. Jaen lost her praising voice long enough to tell people to stay together and obey every warning, then with a practiced flourish, she opened the door and set them free.

The weak winter sun was at their backs, and the wind blew straight at them, carrying the heat away from a tremendous furnace. Springplace rose up like a great temple, too vast to seem real. Their simple dirt hill wasn't as tall as the plateau. The bridge that Dad may or may not have driven across would have had a steep pitch. Nothing remained of it but tangled girders moored in concrete, a bright red barricade warning the curious to stay back.

Nobody visited Springplace anymore. Except in the most incredible circumstances, Jaen conceded.

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The glass wall was seven hundred meters tall, milk-colored and slick, and perched on top, between blocks of scrap glass, were a few brilliantly green gingko trees.

Jaen asked everyone to listen, then she spoke only to Dad, talking about the artistry before them. "What if civilization fails?" she asked, her voice full of practiced importance. "Society collapses and dies, and all knowledge is lost. Then in a little while, or a very long while, ignorant souls stumble upon Springplace. How can we keep them from digging up the hazards in the glass?" She paused. "That was the Artists' mission. How can the innocent be kept from harming themselves and their world?"

Young Savants had ready answers: The glass wall was a barrier. And the barren ground below was another barrier. And there was the Luddite field, generated by the plateau itself, disrupting electrical currents and causing refined metals to corrode at a horrendous rate. The Industrial Age couldn't linger here for long, which was the intent.

Yet there was much more. An old man mentioned the statues, and Jaen nodded, telling her audience, "The day's great sculptors all contributed. Psychological barriers, we call them. In fact, one of the works is visible from here. You see? At first glance, it looks like any glass boulder, but it's actually the image of a human head in excruciating pain."

Daniel squinted, seeing nothing but a lump of bright glass.

Then a four-year-old girl, eyes bigger than big, said what everyone already knew. "And there are the dragons, too. They help protect Springplace."

"Absolutely." Jaen smiled, confessing, "I have a special fondness for the biological barriers. Being a geneticist, by training and by outlook."

Whatever that meant, thought Daniel.

"Genetic tailors have existed for more than a generation," she continued. "But Springplace remains unique. A self-contained, humanmade ecosystem, isolated by climate and other factors. Until we terraform Mars, no one will have the room or resources that were brought to play here."

Jaen named species, stressing their dangers. Every snake was venomous, as were spiders and scorpions and the other vermin. Every plant was inedible or outright toxic to humans. The namesake springs were mineral-laden and undrinkable. The giant central lake was warmer than bath

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water, saltier than the Atlantic, and filled with foul-tasting lungfish and coelacanths, plus crocodiles bigger than any bus. And finally, the superheated jungle was full of giants, including the famous dragons —

"Komodo lizards," the Savant interrupted, proud of her knowledge. "They've been tailored to be large and fast, and they're as smart as cats, too. That's what I've read."

Some Savants could read at two years old. Daniel was jealous.

Jaen pretended to listen, then smiled and asked, "Do you know why the Artists used reptiles?"

"They're scary," the girl reported.

"That's part of it. But what else?"

Silence. Daniel realized that the girl hadn't read that answer.

"Reptiles are ectotherms, dear. Cold-blooded." Jaen arched her eyebrows, explaining, "Cold-blooded means a slow metabolism. Slow means that hundreds of full-grown dragons can live on Springplace. They're wondrous predators and efficient scavengers, and they will live up there for the next half-million years, guarding our poisons."

Savants and ordinary people contemplated those words.

"I adore the dragons," Jaen confessed. "They're large. Fearless. Powerful and swift. And when there's something they want, they are relentless."

There was a long pause.

Then an elbow dug into Daniel, and Dad whispered, "What do you think? Sounds a lot like you and me."

Maybe the dragon was always there.

It lay sprawled out on a huge slab of scrap glass, looking dark and very thin and small with the distance, basking happily in the sun. Nobody had noticed it, just as nobody noticed Daniel climbing over the red barricade, walking out on the old glass girder, then sitting with his feet dangling in the air. Squinting, he watched the dragon, waiting for movement. But it was still as stone, and spellbinding, and Daniel looked back over his shoulder, ready to alert his father.

Dad was busy charming Jaen.

Saying nothing, Daniel looked back just as the dragon lifted its head, its mouth opening and its tail swinging over the edge, making it obvious.

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The tourists noticed. A few at first, then everyone.

Daniel heard their happy chatter. Then someone said, "Careful," and he looked back again, Jaen stepping over the barricade, not quite smiling, looking down to make certain where she placed her feet.

Watching the dragon was more fun than watching people.

When her shadow fell over Daniel, he asked, "How big is it?"

"How big is what?"

Jaen hadn't seen the dragon. *Good.*

Kneeling, she said, "I'm curious. How old are you?"

Daniel didn't look at her. "Five years, five months."

"Really?" she said.

Then she said, "You must be an exceptional boy."

Every child born today was exceptional. Always.

"You're quite an athlete, I understand." She waited a moment, then added, "I can picture you in the Olympics."

He had a Physical's skills, and other genetics, too.

"You're a quiet boy," she observed. "Not like your father at all."

She wanted to be his friend. Dad's women always tried to be his friend, but usually only after Dad had fucked them once or twice.

"He says that your mother died."

Before he could say it was true, that a pissed-off trick kicked her to death, Jaen told him, "I'm sorry for your loss."

The dragon moved again, sliding out of sight. Daniel watched the long head vanish, then the body, and the tail rose up in the air like a flag pole, then suddenly wasn't there.

"You know, Danny. You shouldn't sit out here."

His name was Daniel. Daniel Costas.

"Let's go find your father. Shall we?"

She touched his shoulder, and he let loose a long wet hiss, grabbing her hand and shoving it into his mouth, then biting down on the meat between her thumb and forefinger, calmly watching the pain reach her face, twisting it into the most amazing shapes.

After that day, awake or asleep, Daniel would dream of Springplace.

He searched the Net for programs about the glass plateau, poring over old videos and photographs, plus images taken by satellites. He couldn't

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read well, but he attacked every book on the subject, particularly everything written about the fabled dragons. He learned about dragon habits and habitats, and he even struggled with the incomprehensible genetic charts. Anything useful was worth stealing, and he hid his treasures from his father, unsure what the old man would do with them during one of his black moods.

On his ninth birthday, Daniel marched into a body parlor and ordered a matching pair of tattooed dragons. No one questioned his age. The boy was ninety kilos of quick-twitch muscle and heavy bone. His curly black hair was already thinning and a soft beard clung to his bulldog chin and jaw. The tattoos were his own design, every detail authentic. Sitting stoically, never moving, he watched the newborn dragons spread over his huge forearms, scaly black skin lustrous, eyes like night, and flame-shaped yellow tongues tasting the air for delicious anythings.

Daniel paid with stolen e-cash and walked home, wondering what his father would say, and if they would fight, and if he would allow the old man to beat on him again.

But as it happened, there was no fight.

One of his dad's ambitious deals had gone sour, and some disappointed partners had visited while Daniel was at the body parlor. Using fishhooks and wire, they had lashed the old man to the floor, then carved him up the middle, extracting guts and information.

Daniel stood in the drying blood, staring at the body for a long while, his face empty and very simple and very calm.

He never wept.

But the tiny brown eyes looked very much like a nine-year-old's, gazing out at a world suddenly made vast and unknown.

FOR TWO YEARS, Daniel bounced between foster families.

His longest placement was with a body builder and his doe-like wife. The wife seduced Daniel, promised to spend eternity with him, then, with calculated vengeance, confessed what she had done and how much she had enjoyed herself. Her husband struck her twice before Daniel interceded, yanking the man's arm out of its socket and shattering his jaw. Yet no one regarded him as the hero. The

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bloodied couple blamed the boy for their troubles, and his lover even attacked him with a knife. Daniel broke her cheek with a slap, then took to the street, and he lived on his own for several months before the police finally captured him.

Another family agreed to take the feral boy, if only temporarily. It was simple coincidence that their name also was Costas. A soft couple wracked by rich guilt, they gave Daniel an enormous room and spelled out their laws, then rattled on about misfortune and how adversity can always be overcome. As if they'd ever beat anything worse than bad breath. But the boy remained quiet, appreciating his sweet luck. These people were fat with money and possessions, and he intended to wait, biding his time until he could harvest some of both, knowing they wouldn't miss either.

The couple had one son. Like Daniel, he was eleven, his face boyish, smooth and handsome. And he was tall for any age, maybe not as thick as Daniel but endowed with a graceful, easy strength.

"Call me Mink," he said, offering his hand. And when it wasn't taken, Mink simply pointed at the tattoos, saying, "Pretty well done."

"I know," Daniel told him.

The kid laughed and said, "Come on. Let me show you something."

The world's longest hall ended with a cavernous playroom. A dragon lay at one end of the room, half-grown but still enormous. Daniel stopped in the doorway, astonished. Mink giggled and gave him a sudden shove, then kept giggling as the dragon lifted its head, tasting the air, a slow first step followed by faster steps, soulless black eyes tracking their quarry.

Daniel jumped for the door, colliding with Mink. It was like striking stone. Then Mink said, "Coward," and shoved him into the open. "Dinner, girl. Come get dinner!"

The dragon trapped Daniel between a VR chamber and a weight machine.

It hissed and squealed, then shut its jaws on a flailing arm. The long white teeth were soft rubber. The dragon was a fancy toy, foam laid over a robotic skeleton. Watching Daniel pound on its snout for a minute, Mink said, "Back, girl," and the toy returned to its corner, lying still as death.

Daniel felt like smacking Mink, but he didn't want to lose two fights in the same day.

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"I love those lizards," Mink confessed. "I love to stand on Observation Hill and watch for them."

"Ever see one?"

"Twice," he said, with pride.

"I've been there once, and I saw a dragon." Daniel grinned. "Bigger than your toy, too."

"You're lying," said Mink.

"You're wrong."

"I saw your files. You always lie." The face wore a perpetual smile. "Your dad hired an unlicensed lab to tailor you. He made you...what's the word? He made you a sociopath."

Daniel didn't answer him. His father used to claim that no matter what changed in the world, no matter how smart or good people got to be, there always was room for a mean son-of-a-bitch. Looking at Mink's angelic face, he changed the subject. "What about you? What did your father pay for?"

"Me? I'm just an ordinary Physical." The humility couldn't hide the cockiness. Suddenly the smile seemed very slick. "Your dad was murdered, wasn't he?"

"And I found him."

"I've never known anyone whose father was murdered."

"Jealous?"

He shook his head, then said, "I bet your dad deserved to die."

For the next week, Daniel would be obedient, and quiet, and glancingly polite, and after some coaxing by Mink, the Costas family would agree to keep him indefinitely. But he wouldn't stay because of their wealth or because Mink shared his fascination with Springplace. It was that one harsh comment that proved to the boy that he belonged there.

"I bet your dad deserved to die."

And without hesitation or doubt, Daniel said, "Yeah, he did." He shrugged his shoulders, then added, "He was a mean-fuck. They're supposed to die messy. Always."

It was Mink's idea to climb Springplace.

At least it seemed like Mink's idea. The boys were fourteen, nearly full grown and tired of hunting digital dragons in the VR chambers.

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Wouldn't it be lovely to kill a real dragon? Daniel would pose the question, then describe cutting off its head and bringing it home as a trophy. They could pry out the white teeth, and what would girls at school do for just one tooth? Daniel knew how much his foster brother liked the girls. Then after mentioning the girls, Daniel would shake his head, smile sadly, and admit, "It's just too bad we can't make that trip."

Mink didn't believe in the "can't" word. After enough times, he got sick of it, shouting at the ceiling, "Who says we can't?"

"Climbing the plateau is illegal," Daniel replied.

"Unless we're not discovered."

"And worse," he pointed out, "it's impossible. Only people who work for Springplace can get up there. And even if we did it, we'd die. In about two seconds, probably."

Mink couldn't let challenges stand. His expensive meat was laced with more than just the best synthetic genes. He also carried DNA pulled from great athletes. And even better, he had talents that no tailor can plan. Mink had never lost any contest of physical skills or will. Long odds just made him work harder, his life one great string of sweet, uninterrupted successes.

Mink gave a snort and half-smacked Daniel on the shoulder, saying, "We'll find a way up. Soon."

"You really think we can?"

"Easily," said Mink. But he wasn't a fool, and after some careful reflection, he amended himself. "Not easily. But eventually. And it'll be even sweeter when we get there."

Buses ran up to Observation Hill on the quarter hour.

Each bus and its passengers were examined by sensors run by paranoid AIs — the world's best when they were installed. But that was three years ago, and the software hadn't been updated in eight months. The day's last bus held four boys inside its tiny luggage compartment, and the AIs had been selectively blinded until the stowaways were safe inside the Luddite field. The road began to rise, and the boys cracked the hatch. When the bus slowed on the tightest turn, they grabbed their gear and rolled free, hitting the pavement, then bare dirt, tumbling like gymnasts into a deep, wind-worn gully.

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The two other boys were Physicals. Big amiable kids, they believed instinctively in sweat, team play, and obeying the quarterback. As a team, everyone lay out of sight until the bus came back again, heading home. Then the October sun set, pulling darkness and the stars out of hiding. And Mink gave a signal, the four of them rising, working their way downhill and across the powdery flat ground, reaching Springplace as two moons rose — the genuine moon and its reflected twin caught swimming within the towering glass.

Each boy carried a portion of a rocket. Normal rockets wouldn't fly beside the plateau, the field scrambling any computer or gyro. But Mink had hired a Savant, and this rocket was her invention. Tall and narrow, with precise little wings set at odd angles, it held a thousand separate computers sleeping inside shielded chambers, each with its own electronic eye.

Daniel stood watch while the others assembled the rocket.

With a calm little *whoosh*, it lifted off. Vanished. The first computer was cooked, triggering the next to come on line. Another microsecond, and it was replaced by the third. And the fourth. And the rocket began to fall, its final computer aiming its reinforced nose at a good strong gingko.

At the predicted moment, a black cord dropped at their feet.

Mink grabbed hold with special gloves, then told his team, "Climb like madmen. There's nothing to lose!"

It was relentless hand-over-hand work, and it was scary fun, and it took almost two hours to scale the wall, everyone collapsing into a communal heap afterwards — easy food for any dragon sauntering past.

But there was no dragon, and young muscles recovered swiftly. The boys rose and huddled up, congratulating themselves before heading for the interior. Each carried a gun. Mink had his father's Italian shotgun, every slug laboriously hollowed out and filled with a neurotoxin. His two buddies had hunting rifles, minus laser sights and computer safeties. But the prize was Daniel's savage weapon — twin clips and explosive bullets, enough ammunition on board to slaughter a brigade. He had taken the monstrosity from a neighbor's home, and since just holding the weapon was a federal offense, he didn't expect anyone to bitch.

The four boys moved into the wind, into the heat. Trees became tall and full. The air turned tropical, humid and close, the final traces of October dispelled.

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Mink carried his shotgun in his right hand, toy-fashion. When they found the old truck road — a narrow, claustrophobic tunnel walled with cycads and towering ginkos — he began pressing the pace, outrunning the others, eventually vanishing into the secret land.

Daniel found himself shouting at his brother, anger mixed with strange, unpalatable fears. Yet Mink was fine, waiting beside a pile of rubble — a dead truck, judging by its outline. The Luddite field and the humidity had obliterated its body and heavy engine. Impressed, Mink wondered aloud, "What's the field do to us?"

Touching the metal grit, Daniel said, "You know, my father probably drove this thing."

He had never mentioned the possibility before. The response was pure Mink. A hand clasped him by the shoulder, squeezed hard, then a grave voice warned him, "Save the lies for later."

Was it a lie? Daniel didn't know, and he didn't argue. What mattered was killing a dragon, then taking the trophy teeth, and he could tell any story he wanted afterwards, and every flavor of Savant would have no choice but to respect him for what he had done.

The boys kept moving, but more slowly. A gentle slope led down toward the central lake. Suddenly over the buzz of insects came a sound, a not-distant, not-loud roar spreading through the canopy.

On its heels, silence.

Even the insects held their voices, Daniel realized.

Drenched in sweat, they drank their first canteens dry, took baths in useless bug spray, then began their second canteens, their water stocks looking rather meager.

The jungle was alive. Biting, stinging nothings came from everywhere. Beetles as big as fists marched underfoot. Tortoises bigger than rooms lay asleep, safe in their knobby shells. On the old road, a giant, achingly slow iguana stood propped against a burly tree, on its hind legs, steadily consuming fan-shaped leaves and tender limbs. The iguana would dwarf an elephant, and the Artists had endowed its ancestors with beautiful spines and intricate horns. Yet despite its costume, the creature was defenseless. One of Mink's friends aimed at an indifferent eye, laughed and said, "Boom."

"Leave it alone," Mink warned. "We came for a fair fight."

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A statue of milky glass appeared before them. A warning for the ages, it showed a man in the throes of agony. Poisoned, near death, his flesh and face were melting, his ruined hands raised high, warning the boys to flee and save themselves.

Beyond the statue was a hot spring, water bubbling vigorously in a glass-lined basin. The air stank of mineral salts and sulfurous bacteria; the boys imagined the metallic taste of leaked plutonium. The spring's overflow slid across a long open slope, the jungle opening up around them, and off in the distance they could see the central lake, slick and silvery in the ageless moonlight.

Eventually the water's stink gave way to something more awful. Mink hesitated. Spoke.

"Look there," he whispered.

A second iguana lay in the stream, obviously dead. The boys crept closer, then Mink lifted his free hand and stopped again. Daniel noticed urgency in his stance and heard it in his voice. Then Mink turned slowly, and with a strange slow gentleness, he announced, "We have our dragon."

The monster shuffled out of the jungle. It was low to the ground and looked small until Daniel gauged the distance. A full-grown female or a small male, its head was longer than Daniel was tall, the body and stiff tail making for a creature fifteen meters long, and if well fed, sixteen thousand kilograms, or more.

The wind had fallen off, and the dragon was alert, following their scent through the vivid stinks of water and rot. Long clawed feet splashed and the belly rose and a deep *hiss* escaped from it, sounding like steam, and then all at once it was running, charging straight for them.

Explosions rang out.

The boys with rifles were firing at the head, aiming for a brain buried deep inside dense bone.

The dragon kept running, then suddenly, without fuss or apparent pain, it collapsed. And the two hunters laughed and slapped each other on the back, then began to run, even when Mink was shouting at them, "Wait! Not yet!"

A second dragon appeared, climbing from behind the dead iguana. It was five meters longer than the first dragon, and it was protecting its dinner. The running boys were too busy celebrating to notice the danger,

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and their rifles were empty, and they were exactly between the monster and their friends, neither Mink or Daniel having a clear line of fire.

The dragon accelerated, half-galloping, its wagging head allowing one giant eye, then the other, to track its prey.

With detached fascination, Daniel watched the boys die. They finally fled, but it was too late. They kept together, which was stupid, and one boy slipped in the greasy water, falling hard. Then his friend offered a hand, dooming himself. They were running again, and they were dead, and Mink screamed and fired his shotgun for the sake of noise. And the dragon took the nearer boy, shaking him into two unequal pieces, then dropping him only to grab the second boy from behind, repeating the slaughter with deft, amoral precision.

Mink fired a second blast. And a third. His gun sounded distant, ineffectual. Then he turned to Daniel, and with a crazy lost expression on his face, screamed, "Open up on it! Now!"

Daniel saw Mink, and heard him.

But a sudden enormous terror had taken hold of him.

Daniel began to run. It wasn't a decision. He felt like a passenger inside his own body. It took all of his remaining will just to look over his shoulder, just once, and see Mink — a swifter runner on any day — charging the dragon, fearless genes or his trust in his brother compelling him to fire until his gun was empty, fighting on with a desperate, incandescent rage to save, of all things, the dead.

SENSORS FAR OUT on the plain felt the concussion of gunshots.

Agency guards were waiting when Daniel reached the plain. He was dehydrated and bruised, his weapon lost in the jungle. The arrest occurred without incident. No attempt was made to rescue the other boys or recover their bodies, even though Mink belonged to an influential family. It was a Springplace policy: The moral codes of the human world, including charity and forgiveness, ended where the high glass began.

The lone survivor seemed distant and icily calm, even when he was sentenced to three years in the state's bootcamp academy.

Daniel Costas served his time without serious incident.

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But his barrack mates complained of the boy's periodic nightmares, arms thrown toward the ceiling and a desperate wail coming out of his belly, then lingering in the air like a toxic fog.

Staff psychiatrists found Daniel to be a fascinating subject. When they asked about his dreams, the boy claimed to remember none of them. When they asked about any aspect of his waking life, he spun elaborate and unlikely, yet utterly convincing lies, and no tool at their disposal could separate the truth from his fictions.

"Mink!" he would shout while dreaming. "Run, Mink!"

The other boys guessed what had happened on Springplace, but only one boy risked teasing Daniel about his cowardly flight from a stupid lizard.

That boy was beaten and left crippled, and a hundred others had watched the beating, and not one witness ever came forward.

In later years, there was a lucrative market for dragons and their parts.

Elderly Chinese paid dearly for sexual organs. Nigerian businessmen fashioned charms out of the scales and wore them in secret places. Latin cultures preferred the claws and teeth, adorning themselves with predatory pretties. But the people of the North, too civilized for superstition, simply ate the meat — lean and exceedingly bitter, but laced with rare antioxidants, plus the chemical harbingers of strength and true courage.

Most product was cultured from tissue samples, usually in one of the world's ten million unregistered labs. But some collectors demanded authenticity, and at most there were a handful of reliable sources.

Daniel worked for years as an enforcer in order to raise the necessary cash, then another eighteen months passed while he made arrangements with one supplier, only to have him arrested days before the final transaction. Another six months passed before he could find a new entrepreneur, and after electronic negotiations and a fat down payment, Daniel's luck seemed to have changed.

The anonymous supplier wanted to meet near the city's north edge, in an anonymous park.

Daniel arrived early.

When he was a boy, this land was forest. Now it was manicured

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ground surrounded by cylindrical apartment buildings, a mid-city hustle taking him by surprise.

Only in his late twenties, testosterone had already stolen his hair, and surgery had radically altered his face. His blood signatures and left thumb belonged to an Antarctic rare-earth miner, in case someone demanded cell samples. But Daniel's build hadn't changed, nor had the dragon tattoos, and his eyes regarded the world with the same tireless suspicion, a hundred people enjoying the park and not one of them worth trusting.

Children outnumbered adults at least five to one.

Daniel found himself staring at the youngsters. New genes came on the market every day, and the unborn were being radically tailored. He knew that. But he had been living under the icecap, in a realm without children. He hadn't realized that his species was changing itself so much, and in so many directions at once.

A voice, close and musical, said, "Pretty."

Daniel wheeled, finding a little girl smiling, staring up at him. How old? Judging by her attitude and the wise eyes, he guessed nine or ten. Giving a little growl, he said, "Nothing here's pretty. Go away."

"Oh, sir, but yes. Pretty, yes." She had long hands that didn't quite touch him. "I was referring, sir, to your lovely skin paintings."

The tiny body carried a tall, tall head, and like most of the young children, she wore a protective helmet, thick padding decorated with colorful abstract shapes. A lot of money and hope went into her fancy brain, and her folks obviously didn't want her losing fifty IQ points when she tripped over her own tiny, quiet feet.

"Your dragons are very well done," she assured him.

Another growl. "I know."

She stepped in front of him, utterly fearless. "You seem, sir, a little startled. By us, I think."

"Get away."

"Are you twenty-eight years old?"

"No," he lied. Immediately, without flinching.

The girl had a narrow and oddly pretty face with enormous almond-shaped eyes. When Daniel was a boy, he believed in flying saucers piloted by aliens wearing that face. "Then perhaps," she said brightly, "you are twenty-nine, perhaps."

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"Why should you care?"

"This is my hobby," she replied.

"Guessing ages?"

"Not precisely. I like to identify famous genes." A long finger pointed. "Your baldness and the dimple in your left ear, and that peculiar knuckle hair...they are indicators of the PU99/585 gene. A powerful strength enhancer."

"I'm thirty-one," he assured.

"You're mistaken," she assured. "The crenelations in your nails are a clear sign of KU112/31, which was used for just a few months. It helps with muscle repair, but not very well."

"Listen," Daniel began, ready to threaten.

"Did you, sir, know? This is not your thumb!"

In exasperation, he asked, "What's your age?"

"In a week," she replied, "I will be five and a half."

Shock seeped out of his face. In frustration, Daniel confessed, "I didn't know you little shits were so smart."

"Oh, sir, but I'm not smart."

He glared at her.

"Oh, no! My little sister is going to be much smarter than me. She has nothing but the new triple-G series of neural enhancers."

"Yeah? How old is she?"

With pride and sibling jealousy, the girl reported, "She will be born in three weeks."

Daniel didn't speak for a long while.

"You have other genes," the girl observed. "Artificial, I mean. But frankly, I don't recognize them. Which is interesting."

A woman was strolling into the park, alone, carrying a small box in both hands, navigating with too much caution between the running, screeching geniuses. And with a genuine smile, Daniel told his new friend, "I have to go now. I've got business."

"With that lady over there?"

"No," he lied, by reflex. Then with his best intimidating voice, he added, "And leave us alone, stupid girl."

She gave a giggle, then jumped. "Okay, dragon man!" she sang. "If that's what you want!"

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The woman was new to the business, and her heart still wasn't in it. Wary eyes tried not to look at Daniel, and she held the precious box on her lap, hands clinging to the plastic handle. Sealed and locked, the box appeared boobytrapped. With a nervous flinch, she could incinerate its contents, leaving nothing but ash for prosecutors to use as fertilizer.

"First," Daniel told the woman, "I need to look inside that box. Before you get another dollar."

She was sitting on a bench, gray-haired, gray-fleshed, the face still recognizable and nearly sick with worry. "No," she whispered, "I don't think that's a good idea."

He sat beside her, the park bench twisting to accommodate his enormous frame. Then Daniel slowly and gently placed a hand on her nearest hand, prying it off the handle and holding it toward the sun.

"What's wrong?" she sputtered.

"No scar." He released the hand, adding, "I would have thought my teeth would still show."

Her face turned to wax, pale and slick.

"Open the box, Jaen."

A punched code and her thumbprints deactivated the self-destruct mechanism. Inside the box, nestled in a bed of moldy ginkgo leaves, was a long white leathery egg.

"Good," he muttered.

"I want my money," she said, her voice tight. Frightened.

"What would happen, Jaen? An anonymous complaint to the Springplace agency, and a lifelong employee is suddenly under suspicion — "

"No," she gasped.

"Today," he said, "you're having a half-price sale."

She wasn't meant for this work. Staring at Daniel, she whispered, "It's nearly impossible to get a viable egg. I earned the money!"

"Lady," he said, "you owe me."

"Owe you? Why?"

"If I hadn't bit you, you would have screwed my father. Which would have been a nightmare, believe me." He laughed and closed the box, leaving it unlocked. "Half-price. Or I'll pay full. But if I do, you have to let me chew on your hand again. Huh? Which'll it be?"

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The dragon was born yellow and black, and capable, and with mice or slow fingers, it was vicious.

An abandoned salt mine became the nursery. Xenon lamps ran on timers, the heat flowed from the surrounding salt, and plastic foliage stood around pools of mineralized water, lending shade. As the dragon grew, Daniel moved barricades to give it more room, and he found larger prey. Rabbits and small pigs worked well. Speed and intelligence were no match for instinct and patience. Daniel used cameras to keep tabs on the dragon, and he recorded its attacks, playing and replaying them at all speeds, studying the angles of the head and how the slashing teeth tore at the living meat.

Small animals died immediately. But the largest boars would escape into the fake jungle, their wounds laced with a wide array of patient, murderous bacteria.

Daniel never spoke to the dragon, or pretended it was sentient, nor did he make the mistake of naming it.

He lived in the mine's old machine shop, the surroundings spartan, and appropriate. Twice each week, he went to the surface for supplies and diversions. With his remaining savings, he could afford clean hotel rooms and whores. They were his only luxuries. For the most part, the whores were his age. Younger girls didn't work his haunts, though he assumed they were somewhere, giving perfect pleasure to the brilliant babies.

Daniel's favorite whore was a Social Savant. She wasn't just lovely, she was synchronized to his moods, sensing his desires before he knew them, and with a Social's mystical skill, improving his mood with the right word or touch or the respectful silence.

He would pay to keep her for the entire night, and because he wasn't young anymore, he sometimes slept.

Sometimes the old dreams came.

Suddenly he would scream and leap to his feet, hands raised high.

The Social asked about the dream. Just once. He told her that he didn't remember it and it was nothing, and besides, he was working on the cure. Then he warned her to never mention it again.

One early morning, Daniel found the Social in his belongings. There was no e-cash or jewelry to steal, but that didn't matter. He took her lovely

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face, another man's thumb pressed against the cheekbone, then with chilling precision, he described what he was prepared to do.

She crumbled. Begged. Explained.

She had a sponsor. A Physical, powerful and violent. The Physical had decided that Daniel was rich and too interested in her time. She was under orders. Come home with something of value, she was told, and what choice did she have?

Daniel conceded that there was a dilemma. Then he smiled and gave her a story to tell, and before releasing her, Daniel lent the story authenticity, carefully and thoroughly bruising her entire face.

He waited for a while in the hotel room, then rose and dressed, leaving by the likeliest route. In the pre-dawn streets, the Physical was easy to see — a younger man, smaller than Daniel but certainly stronger. In the last few years, Daniel had butted against those exact genetics, and he respected them, if not the idiots they carried.

In the darkness, Daniel rounded a corner and sprinted, then hid in the first alcove.

The Physical had no chance. One moment, he was a tough little pig marching in the forest, and the next brought misery, blood, and a pitiful thirst for a quick, merciful death.

A robot patrol found the battered man and took him to the nearest clinic on life support.

Three days later, the Social was praising her hero, saying it would be a long time before the bastard could walk again, and Daniel was amazing, and she would gladly work for him instead, giving him her body for free...

He shrugged and half-grimaced. "No, thanks."

But she kept staring at his face, enthralled. With a quiet, knowing voice, she told him, "I think you are a good person."

What was that?

"You heard me," the Social chimed.

Daniel threw her on the hotel floor. Then, for emphasis, he kicked her, just once and almost softly, shattering three ribs and a vertebra.

The dragon reached five meters and nearly five hundred kilos.

Daniel found more difficult prey: stray dogs, guard dogs, two cougars, and a full-grown grizzly stolen from a private collector. The bear was the

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last meal, and for the next few weeks, the dragon feasted and slept; its wounds healed before it was hungry again, before it began to prowl the confines of the salt cavern, searching for its next challenger.

In those last weeks, the dream came more often. Every night, then several times in a night.

Daniel wasn't surprised. The dream was a living thing, a monster in its own right, and it was being threatened. Lashing out, the dream intended to rob Daniel of his courage, his fortitude. Which he wouldn't let happen, he vowed. He waited, keeping his focus until the dragon was crazy with hunger, then stripped down and entered its lair with no weapon but a knife, the serrated blade as long as his forearm, glittering in the bleak glow of the xenon lamps.

The dragon caught his flavor, and without stealth or the smallest caution, began to hunt him.

Daniel let loose an enormous, piercing scream.

The dragon accelerated, lifting its head in the standard bluff.

The moment was syrupy-slow. Daniel began to run at the dragon, watching its nearest foot step and plant, step and plant, and he leapt and took a hard swipe at the long scaly neck, a sweet resistance slowing the blade.

A roar; a purging fountain of blood.

Then the tail found Daniel, delivering a mammoth blow and dropping him, shattering his free arm, and the jaws spread over him as the body shoved him flush against the smooth white floor. But he kept slashing, kicking hard and slipping under the dragon, and with a desperate focus, he placed the blade's tip against a likely spot, driving it upward with his good arm, probing and probing until the cold heart was punctured and the dragon was slumping, dying with a peaceful smoothness.

Daniel felt free. Weightless. Supercharged.

He managed to crawl out from under the carcass and reach the elevator that carried him to the surface. Clothed in two kinds of blood, he drove himself to the nearest clinic, then collapsed, a dozen robot nurses struggling to save his life, then his arm.

The euphoria passed.

Exhaustion pulled him under, and he found himself on the dream plateau once again.

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Mink was waiting for him there, still firing his father's shotgun, still pleading for Daniel's help. The dragon was missing, replaced with a borderless night. But if anything, the terror was worse than before. Mink still charged the blackness, thinking that his brother was with him. And in the dream, Daniel fled again. And in life, he kicked and wailed, soaking his clean sheets with urine while the nurses pumped him full of chemical wonderlands that did nothing but make the dream last all night.

JAEN SAW HIM COMING.

She was meeting with a client — a tiny Chinese man, older than old, probably desperate for a hard-on. When she spotted Daniel, she rose and began to run, dropping the precious box in her panic.

Even battered and with his arm in a therapy cast, Daniel caught her easily. Both the client and box had vanished. No matter. "Listen to me," he told Jaen. "Are you listening?"

"Go away," she whispered.

Children stood around them, quiet and curious faces trying to decipher the bizarre scene.

"Please," she mouthed, her face stricken. Pitiful.

"Listen," Daniel repeated. Then he leaned close, speaking into her ear. "You don't like this work. What you need is a partner, which is me — "

"No. "

"Pay attention." With his good hand, he took her by the neck, gently, and assured her, "You have one choice now. One. Which is more choice than I need to give you."

"A partnership," she whispered, as an experiment.

"Fifty-fifty. And you're going to teach me. And whenever I want, I'm free to buy out your fifty share."

"Teach you what?"

"All your secrets. What else?"

With the help of his hand, Jaen nodded.

Daniel gave her a few more instructions, then sent her home. Then with a certain majestic finality, he sat on the bench, smiling to himself and watching the park return to its normal vibrance.

"Mr. Dragon," said a familiar voice.

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He hadn't heard her approach. Turning, Daniel said, "Stupid Little Girl." She was six and a half years old now. Taller, but still tiny. Surely smarter, but he realized that he had no way to measure the skills that lay behind those vast, seemingly wise eyes.

"I'm glad, sir, that you got my message."

He had asked the girl to call a certain number when she saw the old woman in the park. A hundred e-dollars seemed like too much, but Daniel was in a charitable mood, placing the chip into her delicate long hand. "I'm glad you decided to help."

"And might again, sir. If you need."

For an instant, against his nature, Daniel considered telling her, "You'd be smart to stay away from me."

But instead he grinned, asking both of them, "Why not?"

The children in the park knew him as the Dragon,

Sometimes he spoke to them, weaving spells of half-truths and utter lies. The Dragon told them that he lived on Springplace, inside a dragon's abandoned burrow, and that he came down to the world only to sell his humble wares. He ate nothing but raw turtle meat and fat kicking beetles, and in place of water, he drank berry juice and bat urine. He wasn't even pure human, he claimed. Reptile genes made him grow like a dragon, becoming larger and stronger as the years passed, and he promised he would someday be five meters tall, and the ground would tremble as he walked.

Sometimes, particularly after a lucrative sale, Daniel allowed an audience to gather around his park bench, then with his flat, always serious voice, he would tell them true stories about his brother dragons.

The babies lived in the trees because their larger siblings would eat them without blinking. Adolescent dragons, too large to climb, dug temporary burrows and hunted in the heat of the day. The giants slept in deep caves dug over the decades, and they rose at dusk to hunt and to screw. Daniel told quiet, riveting stories about the adult monsters — the chilling look of their eyes and their easy anger and how if the agency didn't catch him someday, he would certainly die in a dragon's gaping jaws, swallowed whole and digested at its leisure.

The children thought the Dragon was scary and fun, but most important, he was utterly unlike everyone else in their world.

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The Dragon changed Stupid Little Girl to Little, which evolved into Lilt. Lilt became his assistant and chief lookout, and she was in charge of recruiting help from among her friends. With the years, she also became paymaster for their burgeoning staff, handing out money and what the children liked best — the anonymous, untraceable gifts of dragon scales and the enormous shearing teeth.

Daniel never inquired about the girl's family. He didn't want to know or appear to care. Yet he had the impression that Lilt's sister — smarter by plenty — was her parents' favorite, which was why she had the time and freedom to help the Dragon.

One good day, he mentioned the old road on top of the plateau, and how he had just finished walking it from end to end. Then, on a whim, he told Lilt to research the road and the men who used it. He expected nothing, which was why he offered a fat reward; but when he returned to the park, Lilt handed him a thick collection of prison and agency records, including a photograph of a man with Daniel's hard little eyes. It was his father leaning against the fender of a massive truck, rust already gnawing at the metal, a wall of young ginkgos standing behind him. The story had been true after all. Who would have guessed? Daniel paid in full, added a bonus, and with a dose of true feeling, thanked Lilt.

That next year, Daniel got careless and let a young dragon chew on him. Despite antibiotics, his wounds became infected, and in a feverish daze, he staggered into the park, threw an elderly couple out of his bench, then fell like a big tree.

He woke in his own bed, under clean sheets. Of course he didn't live in a dragon's burrow, instead keeping a very ordinary apartment in one of the nearby towers. His home was supposed to be a secret. Yet Lilt came into the bedroom smiling, happy to see him feeling stronger, and she told how she had found him on the bench and hired two Physicals to carry him, and she'd paid them out of petty cash, then hired a med-student whom she met in one of her advanced classes, and he wouldn't tell anyone, either. Then she shut her big eyes and held them closed, asking, "Did I, sir, do anything wrong?"

How did she know where he lived?

Astonished, she opened her eyes. "I've always known," she replied, hurt that the Dragon would underestimate her. "I never, sir, tell what I

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know. But it's in my head nonetheless."

She loved him. It had taken Daniel a long time to notice her feelings, but when he was done being disgusted, he began to culture that love. He offered winks and smiles, and sometimes he allowed her the honor of sitting next to him on the bench. Sometimes she was mothering; sometimes she was a little girl trying to be alluring. Daniel let her play her games. And in turn, she ignored the professional young beauties whom he hired, the best of them tailored to offer men wondrous distractions worth any price.

Eventually Lilt found a genuine boyfriend; Daniel was furious.

He had his reasons, most revolving around his own security. But when she sat on the park bench, talking about the boy, a genuine rage began to build. He didn't understand the feeling or even give the problem the simplest reflection. Instead, he staked out the boy's home and waited, and when his rival appeared, walking back from Lilt's after dark, Daniel squatted in the shadows, ready to ambush him. He fully intended to shatter his body and leave him for dead. But at the last instant, he hesitated, and the boy was past him and safely home, never aware of his incredible fortune.

Eventually, the boyfriend was gone. Another boy replaced him, and after him, another. Lilt might be a genius, Daniel realized, but she also was an adolescent girl who barely knew her own mind — an insight he found useful, and oddly troubling.

Lilt remained his lieutenant and a constant flirt, happy for his attentions and the occasional half-compliment. Looking at her, Daniel would secretly marvel at the knotted ways that his life had organized itself. Who could have guessed that he would make a living through Springplace? Or that every week or two, he would sit with his gang of babies in the public park, entertaining them with stories? And how could he have known that the constant in his life would be a tiny, severely mutated girl-creature who would sit on the bench beside him, legs kicking as she discussed where they would put his profits and if they should put up a jamming field in the park, and what pretty boys she liked today, and why he should be careful tomorrow when he returned to the plateau, going home again to see his brothers...

* * *

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"I want to walk on Springplace," said the prospective client.

"Fat fucking chance."

"And I want to slay a dragon, too."

"Now, that," said Daniel, "I can help you with. Maybe."

The prospective client stood before him, laughing gently, a bright smile beneath dark, impenetrable eyes. Then with a careful pride, the young man said, "I can pay. Don't doubt it. What would be a reasonable fee for a guided tour of the plateau?"

"I'm not a guide," said Daniel.

"I know exactly what you are, Mr. Costas." A pause. "Ten years of selling stolen biological materials. Two arrests, no convictions. As it happens, your competitors weren't as fortunate. That's why you enjoy your current monopoly in this very specific industry." Another pause. "Yet the sad truth, Mr. Costas, is that your client base has shriveled. Fashions change faster than genes these days, and the new generations don't share the traditional awe for Springplace."

Daniel shrugged, saying nothing.

It was early spring, damp and chill, but that didn't keep several dozen children from enjoying their park. The youngest were incandescent wonders, the metabolisms of hummingbirds coupled with tiny swift minds. Lilt and the other teenagers looked ancient by comparison, sitting together on a nearby bench, their skulls nestled inside helmets adorned with painted iguanas and cobalt blue coelacanths. There were also a trio of twenty-plus-year-old men: Physicals as large as Daniel, brought by the prospective client and standing at attention, indifferent to the children's screams and songs, but watching their rubber balls and carbon gliders with a sleek, professional suspicion.

"You're awfully young," Daniel observed. "Why do you care about the big lizards?"

"I hunt. An authentic Springplace dragon, acquired in authentic surroundings, would make a stellar addition to my collection."

"What's your name?"

"You need to know your clients' names?"

Daniel stared at the boyish face, his tall skull covered with Brazilian armor and a necklace of dragon claws. "In this case, absolutely."

"Portion. Portion Kalleen."

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The name felt genuine, and vaguely familiar.

"If we can agree on a fee, you get a third now. And a third more when we reach Springplace. 'We' includes my assistants to help carry home the skull, of course." Portion showed Daniel his best smile, then added, "The last payment comes with a successfully slain dragon."

Daniel glanced at Lilt. With a look and a whisper, the girl urged him toward caution.

He quietly and firmly named an impossible figure, one that would allow him to retire.

Immediately, Portion said, "Agreed."

Then Daniel put up another wall, adding, "I'll need that down payment before we can start planning — "

"It's being done." Amusement and a worrisome light showed in the eyes. "I know about your orbital accounts, Mr. Costas."

"You know almost everything."

"If that were the case," said the amiable voice, "why would I have use for you?"

THERE WERE FLAWS in the great plateau.

Mammoth projects are destined to suffer the occasional flaw, materials and workmanship falling short of lofty goals. Springplace was built as a series of concentric rings, most flaws buried deeply; and the agency, to its credit, had done a superlative job of patching the exterior. But years ago, Jaen reopened an old patch, knowing that the glass behind it held a labyrinth of bubbles, and if someone climbed with determination, making the correct turns, she would eventually reach the green summit.

The hunting party stood in the reopened patch, and when one of Portion's bodyguards began to hang back, Daniel had simultaneous thoughts: "I'm getting careless in my middle-age," and "This trip hasn't shit to do with hunting dragons."

Daniel faced the man, asking, "What do you want?"

Save for a contemptuous glance, there was no answer.

Daniel turned to his employer, and with his hardest voice asked, "Who else is coming?"

"A few more associates. Is that a difficulty?"

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Each man carried a bioluminescent lamp, the feeble glow of bacteria focused into blue-green beams. Daniel shone his beam into Portion's face, telling him, "You're going to explain this to me. What are you really chasing?"

Like a little boy who enjoyed his games, Portion said, "Guess."

Something biological? But every endemic species had been smuggled off the plateau. Daniel had removed hundreds of them. There was nothing left that was unique, except the crap buried in the glass...and with an amused scorn, he laughed and said, "What would you want with plutonium?"

Again, in delight:

"Guess."

Daniel couldn't. "You can't pry it out by hand, and machines don't work in the field. And even if they did, you can't just walk out of here with nuclear bombs strapped on your backs."

Portion blinked, then said, "I know what you are, Mr. Costas. As long as you're paid, and as long as it's enough money, you won't care what I'm doing."

Daniel almost spoke, almost agreed.

Then he saw something move on the empty plain. Rising up out of the barren ground came a platoon of armed men, each wearing a ghost suit and a bulky pack. And between two of the men was a familiar figure. Tiny. Probably exhausted. And no doubt terrified.

He was very careful with his voice, asking, "What's she doing here?"

"What do you call her? Lilt?" Portion shook his head. "She's been investigating me, which I don't like. Bringing her seemed like the responsible precaution."

Lilt had done research, but what had she learned? Almost nothing, the truth told. Portion was a Savant's Savant. He had hobbies beyond number, including blood sports. But there was no criminal past. And, of course, he was wealthy. The sole heir to a famous tailor's fortune, he was likely the richest twenty-two-year-old in history.

"Bringing the girl," said Daniel. "Why go to the trouble?"

The young man smiled, then admitted, "It's possible that I might not know you as well as I thought." Then he glanced at his bodyguards, saying, "Mr. Costas looks weary. Carry his weapons for him, please."

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Daniel avoided Lilt: her piercing gaze. The reaching hand. Then the sound of her voice, ragged and slow, answering a question that he hadn't asked, telling him, "I am, sir, pretty much fine."

Even in his thoughts, she wasn't welcome.

Obeying Portion, Daniel led the little army to the summit. Then at Portion's insistence, he changed into self-cooling overalls, sprayed himself with odor-masks, and crept out into the first light of morning, unarmed, making sure that the dragons and agency guards were elsewhere.

Standing alone, gazing up at a tall old gingko, Daniel considered running. But without water or a weapon, his chances were poor. Which was the only reason not to escape, he told himself.

Portion opened an agency map, his destination already marked.

"The last of the plutonium went here," he explained. "What's the best route?"

Daniel drew a curved line with his fingernail.

"Not straight across?"

"We want open ground. Clear skies mean plenty of heat, and the dragons will be keeping to the shade."

"Stupid, primitive lizards," said Portion scornfully.

Daniel remained silent.

"Lead away. I want to be there by this evening."

The group followed a cycad-studded ridge. Below them, the forest was broken with hot sulfurous ponds and the occasional geyser. Claw-winged hoatzins circled above something dead. Daniel paused to watch them and to let the others catch up, then he turned to look for Lilt, unaware that he was doing it until too late. The girl was just managing to keep up. A tiny body, but tough enough. Tougher than he would have guessed, and he felt something, and he stood there wrestling with whatever he was feeling. It made no fucking sense. Lilt wasn't useful to him anymore. And when he made his break, he wouldn't look over his shoulder again...

He wouldn't make that mistake a second time...

The day passed without major trouble. A few young dragons lashed out from the shadows. Some men were bit, but not deeply. The dragons

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were killed swiftly with silent guns, the wounds were treated with clotting agents and preprogrammed antibodies, and just in case they smelled of blood, the injured were ordered to walk behind the others, keeping a safe distance.

Portion's goal was a large clearing, smooth glass unmarred by vegetation or soil. A statue — one of the vaunted psychological barriers — stood at the far end of the clearing. Abstract and intentionally ugly, its twisted angles and gibbous rings were intended to warn the future of the dangers underfoot. But Portion thought the statue was beautiful. While his men began unloading their packs, he strode over to the artwork, fondling the malevolent red-black glass as Daniel was brought to him. Then with genuine curiosity, he asked, "Have you ever been *here*?"

"No," Daniel lied.

"Never?"

"It's a big plateau."

"Isn't it?"

The old truck road lay behind a stand of dawn redwoods. Daniel didn't look in its direction. Instead, he turned just as Lilt collapsed on the glass, thoroughly spent. His face remained calm and indifferent. Perhaps even a little scornful. Gesturing at the very peculiar contents being pulled from the nearest pack, he risked the obvious question:

"What do your toys do?"

Portion was amused, and proud. He picked up what looked like a piece of ornate jewelry, allowing his guide to hold it. Dense and cold to the touch, the object was at least as unsettling as the statue behind them.

"Its housing contains a hot superconductor," said Portion. "Carefully shaped, fully charged. That's what protects the machine's guts from the Luddite field."

"What do the guts do?"

"Ingest plutonium, of course." He took back his treasure, then with great care said, "What this 'toy' is, in fact, is an unfueled nuclear weapon. It can burrow through almost any substrate. It absorbs fissionable materials, swelling a thousandfold. And once fueled, it waits. Patiently. A coded seismic shockwave would cause it to detonate. If I wish."

Daniel glanced at the girl, for an instant.

"And now you know everything about me, Mr. Costas."

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"No." He shook his head, adding, "I'm just a stupid lizard."

Portion appreciated the humor. He was grinning, his face very young and utterly simple. "What happens if an individual gains control of these plutonium stocks? The proverbial finger is on the light-switch, and there are no limits to what he can demand."

Daniel stood motionless, saying nothing.

Prodded by silence, Portion added, "A few hundred atomic weapons will be buried in the glass, protected by Springplace's own defenses... and if they're detonated, at once, and all of the surrounding glass and poisons are vaporized..."

Under his breath, with feeling, Daniel said, "The dragons, too."

"Oh, it won't happen. For the most part, people act in their own self-interest."

Daniel waited for a few moments, then made a pistol with his hand. He lifted his hand, pointing at Lilt. "She could be a problem for you."

"Do you think so?" Portion asked doubtfully.

"She may have warned her parents, or the other children."

"There's a cover story explaining her absence, and besides, those people are being watched." Portion shook his head. "I know how to take precautions, too, Mr. Costas."

But Daniel pretended not to hear him. "Let me ask her some questions. If the kids back home are worried, they'll contact the agency."

Portion hesitated, then said, "I don't believe you."

With a dry, angry voice, Daniel said, "Listen. I'll keep helping. I will. But you have to give me a bonus."

"What sort of bonus?"

"Life. Let me out alive."

"That's always been my plan, sir."

The young man was lying, but he did a pretty job of it.

"The thing is," Daniel lied, "if Lilt managed to warn anyone, then my kids will contact the agency. They're supposed to invent any crazy story that'll put a thousand armed soldiers up here, hunting for me." He waited for an instant, then added, "My standing orders: Prison time is a lot sweeter than dead time."

"The girl is a little burden," Portion allowed.

"I'll ask her questions," Daniel said. "Then, I'll unburden us."

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"Would you do that for me?"

He nodded.

"Right now," Portion urged.

"But not here." Daniel scratched his bald scalp with his huge hands. Then with an expert's omniscient authority, he announced, "It's evening, and that's when the big dragons come hunting. A whiff of blood is all it takes to put them in a mood."

In delight, the monster said, "So I have heard."

"I'm thirsty," said Lilt. Twice.

Daniel was leading the murderous group into the jungle, paralleling the old road. Two bodyguards hung behind him, Portion between them, and a third walked point, helping to block Daniel's escape route. The girl was directly behind Daniel, close enough to touch. "I'm thirsty," she said, and he pretended not to hear her. Pointing in a likely direction, he said that the underbrush there looked easier. But Portion was suspicious, or at least unwilling to leave him with every decision. "No," he said, "keep going. Just a little farther, I should think."

Again, louder this time, Lilt said, "I'm thirsty."

And Daniel said, "Too fucking bad."

A pair of canteens rode his belt. When she grabbed a canteen and pulled, he spun and slapped the hand away. And for the first time that day, he found himself staring at her face.

It was worse than he could have guessed. Lilt was bruised beneath the left eye, and she looked very angry and tired but not scared. She looked like a kid on a long uncomfortable hike. Her padded helmet with its iguanas and coelacanths was ridiculous. He felt sick and very nearly weak when he looked at the helmet and at her purpled face, and he responded by taking his left hand and smacking her once, in a clean crisp motion, driving her into thorny brush, a matching bruise blossoming and Daniel standing over her, telling, "Don't touch my goddamn water."

Everyone was impressed, including Daniel.

It was Portion who helped her up, playing the role of the understanding ally. "Don't look so mortified," he advised the girl, draping a friendly arm over her shoulder. "You have no right to feel surprised."

She was stunned, and terrified.

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Daniel had won a measure of latitude. He said, "Up there would work. Up in that bowl, out of the wind."

Portion agreed.

The light was fading. Shadows had spread and merged, obscuring whatever lay inside the bowl.

It had been years since Daniel last walked here.

He couldn't be sure what was waiting in the shadows. He barely knew what he was planning. One moment, Daniel was walking, the lead bodyguard almost reaching the bowl's earthen cusp, and the next moment he reached back and grabbed the girl, shaking her like a doll as he screamed, "Did you warn anyone?"

"Warn who?"

"Does the agency know? Did you tell them?"

"No," she promised. "I would never — !"

He slapped Lilt's helmet, then tossed her to the ground. Then she was crying, which just about ruined him. He watched her curl up and weep, hating that sound. Break her neck, and he would be done with her. Why not? He grabbed the girl by that frail thread of meat and spine, and he lifted her, something in his face utterly convincing, wild hot eyes blazing as Lilt dangled before him, tears coming fast. And that was when Daniel did a half turn, spying a sudden smooth motion from inside the bowl.

From the shadows came a tongue, yellow-as-fire and impossibly long, rising higher than a man, tasting the night's first air.

Daniel took Lilt's ear into his mouth, biting down, hard enough to make her wince.

Everyone watched him, spellbound.

Into the bruised ear, Daniel whispered, "The old road. Run."

"What'd you say?" asked Portion.

Then Daniel grabbed the girl's tiny bottom with his right hand, and he wheeled suddenly, using his arm and legs, and with a solid grunt, he threw Lilt, a long smooth arc carrying her out of sight.

The bodyguards seemed curious. Was this part of the interrogation?

Then the dragon exploded from its burrow, roaring, a thunderous crimson voice splitting the air, the world trembling.

I'm dead, thought Daniel.

Help me, Mink... !

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Then he leaped, grabbing Portion by his armored helmet, and with thick hard fingers, Daniel stabbed upwards, piercing the toy jaw and the sinuses, then the tissue-thin skull, reaching deep inside the cavernous skull.

Here's where the real dragons lived.

The first tourists of the day spotted Lilt.

Exhausted and badly dehydrated, Lilt stood beside the Miserable Man statue, waving her arms and shouting out a warning. Some of the tourists waved back. Wind-thinned voices said, "Hello, darling!" They couldn't hear her. Perhaps if she climbed higher, she thought with a fatigued logic; but halfway up the anguished glass face, she lost her grip, and it was as though she fell for hours, ending up inside a warm black nowhere.

Agency officials raised a narrow prefabricated bridge, medics found Lilt in the statue's mouth, and the ranking officer grudgingly sent armed patrols into the interior, on the unlikely chance that her incredible story was even partly true.

The unfueled bombs and a few terrified young men were found. But the only trace of Daniel and Portion were bone fragments in a dragon's wastes, both of their DNA identified by forensic experts.

The girl was subsequently arrested and given a quick trial.

As the main accomplice in a string of felonies, she was threatened with a fifty-year sentence. But as her heroic role in a much greater crime became apparent, the public forgave Lilt. She was given a ten-year sentence as a compromise, and it was reduced to time served, and for a little while, without her consent, the bright and very fortunate young woman was subject to an international fame.

In the aftermath, the agency strengthened its Luddite field, plugged every minuscule gap in the plateau, then trucked away the entire Observation Hill; the public forbidden to pass within ten kilometers of the nuclear repository. And in a final, excessively paranoid gesture, Lilt was placed under permanent observation, her movements and transactions studied in depth, investigators looking for any sign of Daniel's missing wealth or any warning that the girl, despite outward appearances, was returning to her old ways.

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Lilt continued living quietly in her home city.

She eventually married and gave birth to twins, and on occasion, for private reasons, she would visit the little park, sitting on one of its new benches, watching her children play the mysterious, indecipherable games popular among their generation.

It was twenty years after Daniel's death when a team of Savants found the means to easily and cheaply marry the human mind to immortal AI machinery, freeing memory and intellect from the limits of genetics and the vagaries of death.

The Age of DNA was finished.

Within six months, the public were being transformed by the new process.

Within two years, the world's sentient organisms had come to the obvious conclusion: The Earth was too small and too dull to hold their interest any longer.

The sole exceptions were a community of Luddite-inspired ultra-Physicals. Funded by a secret sponsor, they were able to win the right and public approval to remain behind, serving as caretakers for the home world. Everyone else packed and began to board the bright new starships. People working for the Springplace agencies were the same as anyone else, excited by the prospects, their attentions divided by change and opportunity. Which was why on a cool autumn morning, Lilt could leave home, scheduled to finally undergo her marriage with the machines, but she somehow slipped away from her usual watchdogs, never arriving at the clinic.

A general alert was called, as a precaution.

Even so, Lilt reached the plateau without incident.

Unobserved, she returned to the place where Daniel had died, the scene thoroughly unremarkable, nothing left to show that here, on this ground, her species and the world averted disaster. In one hand, she carried a shapeless lump of pinkish glass. On tiny quiet feet, Lilt walked up to the dragon's vast burrow, and she paused, watching the darkness, listening hard until it seemed that she could hear the monster's slow strong breathing. Then she threw the lump of glass, threw into the darkness, and she turned, walking away slowly, pushing tears back up into the big almond-shaped eyes.

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* * *

"Listen to me! This is my story!"

Without pause or the illusion of breath, the dragon-man statue spoke through the night. Then at first light, it told how Lilt emigrated with her children; and how the ultra-Physicals — the noble ancestors of today's noble giants — had encased the Earth in a powerful Luddite field, dooming every conceivable machine; and how Lilt's apparently simple lump of pink glass was actually coated with tailored diatoms that accreted new layers over the centuries, the statue emerging gradually, shaped with nothing but patience and the cells' own sturdy genetics.

Then with a last flourish, the statue's voice grew soft, announcing, "I will talk no more. My story is done."

The machinery installed by Lilt, bathed in the withering Luddite field, died quietly.

True or not, the statue's tale would have been an enthralling thing to share with others. Eventually the entire world would have heard it told and retold.

Yet as it happened, the scholars and novices heard nothing more than those first thundering words.

"Listen to me! This is my story!"

It was impossible, insane. A statue was speaking to them! As one, they turned away, and in utter panic, they ran through the jungle like scared little pigs.

No one heard the story. Except, that is, for a single passing dragon that paused just long enough to taste the air, finding nothing there worth eating.

Today, and forever, the dragon-man statue stands mute and motionless, the dimensions of its heroism left to the imagination of the young.

But, of course, that may be for the best.

With heroes and with children, it usually is.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

HARD TO BELIEVE we've already reached March. In like a lion, out like a lamb, the Ides...March is one of those months filled with bluster, history, and lots of bewares.

In honor of March's horrific reputation, we lead with a gentle horror story from a writer who last appeared in our pages in the 1960s. **Albert Cowdrey** sold one novel and a few short stories under the name **Chet Arthur** in 1967. Then he turned his attention to his profession, the teaching of history, and published eight history books. When he retired, fiction called again. Since March of 1995, he has sold us four stories, two of them cover stories. The first to appear is "The Familiar," a tale of witchcraft and neighbors set in a beautiful section of New Orleans. "The Familiar" is anything but familiar, and it will whet your appetite for the other Cowdrey stories to come.

One of our favorite writers, **Laurel Winter,** returns to our pages with a lovely tale of loss and love. Amy's husband David has died unexpectedly, and she finds an unusual way to reincarnate him in "David's Ashes."

Also in March, we have an event. **Timothy Zahn**, the Hugo award winner and *New York Times* bestselling author, returns to the short fiction field with a stunning novella. "The Art of War" is a far-future sf story, the kind rarely done anymore, complete with sense of wonder and a fascinating society. Do not miss this story.

We have more surprises planned for you in 1997. **Esther Friesner, Nina Kiriki Hoffman**, and **Mike Resnick** all take a stab at writing a story around the same cover painting. Esther's tale is sf, Nina's is horror, and Mike's is pure fantasy. Also upcoming, we have tales from **Ray Bradbury**, **Jack McDevitt**, and **Lewis Shiner**. So make sure your subscription is current.

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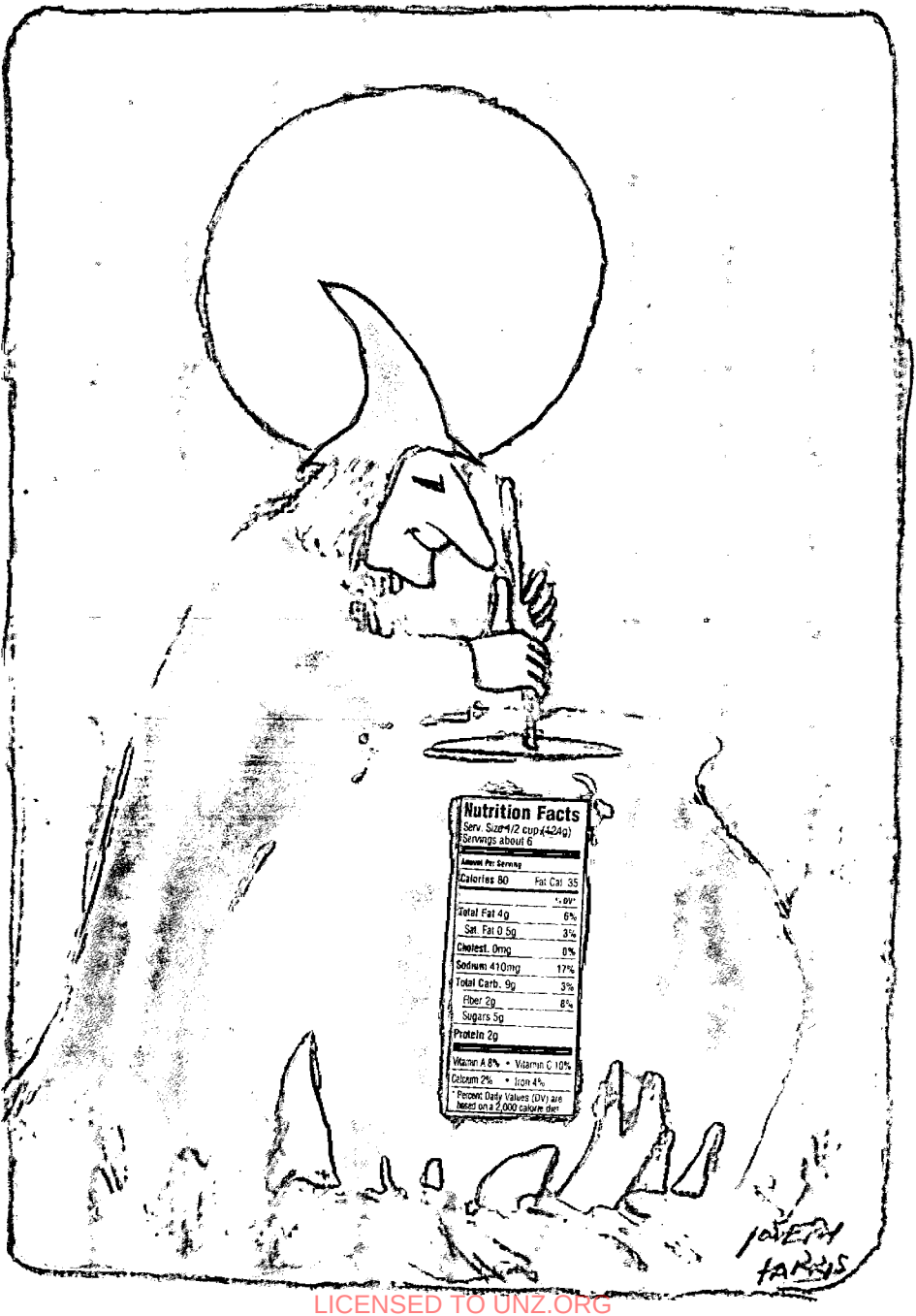

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